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MARDEN FEE

By the same Author

THE PANDERVILS

THE WORLD IN BUD

THE BAKER'S CART

MR. GODLY BESIDE HIMSELF

THE STREET OF THE EYE

DREAMING: *An Essay*

THE SPANISH CARAVEL

A Tale for Children

MARDEN FEE

A Novel

by

Gerald Bullett

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THE FIRST ARC

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CHAPTER 1

A YOUNG MAN IS ACCUSED, AND THE STORY OF HIS CRIME BEGINS

IF from a great height we look down on the scene of my story, we shall see the convex surface of the earth as a small shining disk, one of a myriad spinning coins tossed into space by the unknown minter ; and, if our vision serve us, we shall see, moving on that disk, events that are now ages old. So we may begin in however remote a past, and, descending stage by stage, make our own terms with time, the line of our vertical downward flight being the instrument with which, at our pleasure, we may accelerate or retard its motion. Somewhere upon the face of that small world is England ; somewhere on England is the South Downland ; and in the heart of that country—microcosm of a microcosm—lies the little patch of territory, as yet undefined, that is one day to be known as Marden Fee. It is a small enough space, but the world itself is no bigger in meaning ; for meaning is of the heart, and all that the heart knows and suffers can be read, if it can be read at all, as plainly in this hamlet as in the universe at large : more plainly indeed, for the less contains the greater, and here is an horizon that curves comfortably into the eye.

But Marden Fee is not yet in being ; we can but see the place where it will one day be ; and now, as we watch from our chosen height, Koor the patriarch, stately in his house of wattle and daub, sits in judgement on one of his many sons. A female of his tribe—a young girl of whom, as it happens, Koor himself is both father and grandfather—has been touched, and the patriarchal prerogative flouted, by the golden-bearded young upstart who now, with hate sparkling in his eyes, stands in a circle of spears five strides from his father. Koor is ancient and very hairy. His old body, much of which is naked, bears the scars of a thousand mutilations ; his face seems all but featureless, nothing beyond wild beard being visible except a spike of nose, a wrinkled receding forehead, and two small bright frosty eyes. His hands, clasped over his plump belly, are brown and knotted ; his fingers are so thin that they extend like claws from his huge knuckles. By the standards of the time he is fabulously old : the number of his moons is indeed beyond the computation of his contemporaries, although, since his birth, at every period of the moon's pregnancy—for the moon at regular intervals becomes big with a brood of stars—the left ear has been cut from a female wolf-cub, and these powerful tokens, nearly six hundred by now, at this very moment hang about his neck in the form of a necklace : not only a symbol of age and authority but a device of great practical use, since this mutilation of ears enables Koor to hear the secret speech of his enemies. At sight of that

monstrous charm every man with treachery in him puts a check even on his thoughts, for the wolf has quick hearing, and these many wolves together, with Koor's cunning added, may perhaps learn even the thing that is not said. So thinks the lean wizard who stands at the Old One's side and at intervals, in a chanting voice, testifies to the malice of the gods towards them that suffer a sinner in their midst. A crafty fellow, this wizard. He has told many tall stories in his time, and it is his tragedy, making him the half-demented scarecrow we now see, that he has always ended, even if he did not begin, by believing them himself. He is thinking, now, that Koor is old and losing his power, and that the time is fast coming when he, the wizard, must choose a new master and betray the old. Master? Or tool? He doesn't know. He only knows that he is mortally afraid of that necklace, of which the tradition is older than himself, who is next in age to Koor. 'Woe and pestilence on them that suffer a sinner!' he moans, with mechanical unction. There is safety in that formula, and by making that much noise he will prevent, so he hopes, his thoughts from reaching the Old One. One man alone, in all this assembly, fears not the necklace; and that one is the prisoner, Ogo, who, thinking himself already as good as dead, is emancipated from all other fears. Ogo's thoughts run free as water in a broad stream, but the bed of this stream has been broken, the mud stirred into motion, by a dropped pebble, the anticipation of death; so that

all the man's memory, except when he reaches a state of trance, is clouded and rippled by conjecture.

Could we pierce beyond that cloud, smooth away those ripples, his memories would be clear to read : how it all began, this dire trouble, many days ago—and 'many' to him means 'more than seven', for after seven is mystery—many days ago when he and Hawkon, his brother and comrade, met with some few others of the sons of Koor and talked mischief of their father. The conference took place, as was most necessary, deep in the forest and far from the clearing, the broad green valley, where, with Koor's great squat for centre, the tribe lived. Even so it was a desperate and dangerous affair. But Hawkon today was intoxicated with himself. He had done wonders, he said. He, he alone, had raided a foreign people half a day's journey distant, and was come back with a tale of having killed many men and captured a woman for wife. The many men killed may have been a fiction : a theory that does not impugn Hawkon's honesty, for on the journey home, with a bride for company, he had had time to weave fancies, and the capacity to distinguish, in retrospect, between fancy and fact was not general among the sons of Koor, for whom the life of dreams was as valid as waking experience and often in memory confused with it. But whatever men he had slain or not slain, of the woman captured there could be no doubt, for there she was, young and taking, and already following Hawkon's every gesture with

slavish adoration. There she was and you could look at her if you liked, but if you were wise you would not look too long or too appreciatively, lest Hawkon should be tempted to add to his greatness by thrusting his flint-headed spear into your belly. For, though to kill sib was a crime, to punish adultery—even before it was committed—was a virtuous deed. Since Hawkon had touched this woman, and taken her for wife, she was to all others forbidden; only by enforcing such taboos, which encouraged every man to acquire a foreign woman for himself, could Koor be sure of retaining his own monopoly rights over all the women of the family. The law, however, was not of Koor's invention: he had had it from his father, and there is no doubt—or in Koor's mind there was no doubt—that it had come in the first place from those mysterious unseen powers who were, as it fortunately chanced, chiefly concerned with maintaining the prestige and power of the Old One. Koor and his wizard frequently communed with these gods, and seldom failed to profit by what they heard. If drought could not be brought to an end by the ritual watering of the sacred stone, then a child must be buried up to its neck in the ground so that by its lamentations, and still more by the small rain of its tears, it should soften the heart of the rain-god. These or similar things had only to be done often enough, and rain would certainly fall, or cease falling, whichever was desired. Thus, by the scientific method of trial and error, for every evil could

be found a remedy: one needed only a little patience, a little reverence, and much faith.

Hawkon's woman was tall and dark and very lusty. She nestled in the crook of her lord's arm and gazed at him dumbly while he discoursed. 'She is my woman,' said Hawkon, not for the first time. 'She is my woman. She's a good one, I can tell you. I shall call her name Flint, because there's fire in her.'

'A woman!' sneered Ogo. 'What name can a woman have?'

Ogo was consumed with jealous hatred of this outlandish big-breasted female who was engaging all his beloved Hawkon's attention. Moreover his question was pertinent; for Hawkon must have known, as well as anyone else, that a woman, though she might be called this or that, could have no very name of her own, as a man had. Ogo was called Ogo; Hawkon was called Hawkon; but these were not their names. Each had a secret name, known only to himself and to the god who, communicating through the wizard, had given it to him at the first audible sign of puberty, which is the breaking of the voice (for it is then that the man enters the child and speaks in him). To utter one's true name aloud was the gravest risk one could take; and to whisper it in the ear of one's friend was the mark of the most absolute love and trust, since it made him a gift of one's very soul. It was to say, in effect: 'My life is in your hands; I would not live a moment longer than you wish.' This extreme of

devotion being naturally a rare experience, another name was chosen that should stand for the true name without betraying it. Ogo, for example, was called Ogo; his name was called Urding; but his name itself only he knew, he and his one comrade, Hawkon, to whom he had confided it. So, in declaring that he would call his woman's name Flint, Hawkon was talking offensive nonsense. If he had said that he would call *her* so, the remark would have been blameless enough, for clearly even a woman must be called something.

'It shall be as I say,' said Hawkon, glaring fiercely at his friend.

The two young men confronted each other with menace in their looks. In years, had they reckoned so, they were still in their teens. Both were fair, with beards of a downy growth. Hawkon was slightly the bigger of the two—a brawny fellow well matched with this woman Flint. But Ogo was as tall as a man needs be, and had a quickness denied to the other; the habitual expression of his face was that of an innocent animal, gravely intent. It was in his mind now that he must kill Hawkon, or himself be killed; and the fact that this idea did not at once issue in action—for in the tumult of his jealousy he had forgotten fear of Koor's law—marks him off as something of a freak in his community. He hesitated; he faltered; he shrugged his shoulders.

'So be it,' he said. A sick and weary grin troubled his features for a moment. 'She is your

woman, and it is you that will call her.'

The others—they numbered six, all told—grunted with excitement, with approval, with disappointment. Or it may be they grunted only from habit. And after a long silence the boy called Stare said suddenly: 'Koor the Old One quivers. His voice is a frog's voice.'

'He is a falling tree,' said another.

'Worms are eating him. He lives too long.'

They growled like dogs, these young men. They laughed and uttered contemptuous obscenities about their oppressor. But Hawkon, in the midst of the uproar, struck a note of warning. 'The Old One has many ears, many eyes, many hands. The Wise One sits at his side and the gods are his gods.'

Ogo was gazing thoughtfully at a young sapling. He said: 'This is a tree. This is not Koor. But——' He struggled with an idea beyond expression. He had no language for his thought, and therefore his thought was not complete. He wanted to say: 'But if it *were* Koor.' But 'if it were' was a conception too difficult for him. He had then to choose between saying: 'This tree is a tree' or 'This tree is Koor'. Either statement would have been understood and accepted without question, but neither was what he wanted. The first meant nothing; the second meant more than he dared commit himself to. His problem was this: if he identified the tree with Koor, and struck it down, would Koor die, or would he, Ogo, be

himself assaulted by Koor's all too observant gods? But he could not even state the problem. He glanced at the blank faces of his companions, vainly seeking help of them; then shut his mouth with a snap and was silent.

CHAPTER 2

OGO KILLS ONE STRANGER AND BEFRIENDS ANOTHER

BY THIS incident two seeds had been sown, without his knowledge, in Ogo's mind: doubt of Koor's invincibility and the resolve to possess a woman. Neither doubt nor resolve was clearly articulated. Nor was Ogo aware of the unrest within him. He was restless, but the restlessness was not accentuated by knowledge of it, as it would have been in a man who had learned the trick of considering himself as a person, a centre of events. Without thought he felt an itch to go adventuring. And without plan, being driven by a motive that made no mark on his consciousness, he went. He went swiftly, unhesitatingly, with a simple directness that intelligence could not have achieved, would indeed have thwarted. He went in quest of a strange people. And he went stooping, with nostrils quivering for scent and ears intent for sound. The pelt of a wolf that he had himself slain covered his loins and one shoulder; and a strip of raw hide, fastened round his middle with a wooden peg, held his one weapon, a short-handled flint axe that had a sharp edge for cutting and cleaving and a blunt round head for use in close fighting.

Darkness came twice, full of devils and danger ; and still his obscure purpose held him and mastered his fears. He had passed over many hills and into a forest that was strange to him. He had eaten nothing but a snail or two since he left the squat, and for hours had drunk nothing but a handful of the dew he found trickling, in slow meagre drops, down the trunk of a tree and coaxed with infinite patience into his cupped palm. And he had met nothing human. At the beginning of the third darkness, crouching and shivering, he heard a mighty snorting and stamping and the sound of breaking branches. The hunted beast, black in the half light, came within a hand's touch of him and fell, pierced through the eye, no more than a dozen strides away. Its brazen screeching shook the world. The hunters, howling triumphantly, gathered round the carcass. They were foreign men ; their garb and their gestures were outlandish ; Ogo became rigid. A picture flashed into his mind : the boar plunging into its trap, a concealed pit ; the hunters hurling stones upon it ; its escape, by some magic ; and this, the end of the chase. In and out of his mind the picture flashed, more quickly than the intake of a breath ; and left no memory but only the certain knowledge that it had all happened so and so. The fear that had made him shiver now made him still. His mouth watered ; his belly ached with desire ; his lips curled back, baring the dog-teeth. Raw flesh and warm blood—in fancy he tasted them already. He was appetite. But he was something

else as well, and that something else, that spark in the earth of him, saved him from running straight to his death. The hunters, a disorderly rabble, had leapt upon the carcass and were hacking at it with their knives and axes, and tearing at it with their long fingers. Their frenzy infected him with a like frenzy, but he controlled it. The danger he feared was not that of death or torture at the hands of this strange gang: his fancy did not stretch so far. What he feared most was to lose this chance of meat. The light was fast failing; the prancing figures appeared jet-black and their faces featureless; behind them a triangular patch of greenish sky was visible, framed by trees. Ogo was so near these strangers that he could hear their grunts, their panting breath; yet their yells and chattering, their greed and snarling anger, came to him swathed in the soft shadows of dusk and with an effect of remoteness. He was all intentness, every nerve taut with the ecstasy of crisis; yet there was something dreamlike, for him, in this unwonted waiting, this conflict of impulses. He was engaged in a new adventure, the adventure of thought.

The riot of moving figures suddenly resolved itself into a kind of pattern. One taller than his fellows stood on the beast's head and with his axe made menacing circles in the air. He uttered a strident cry, and disorder was quelled. The beast had been already partially dismembered; and now, with much pushing and pulling, the remaining bulk of him was set in motion. Seeing himself frustrated

of food Ogo acted quickly. He began crawling backwards, and continued so, his toes clutching into the soft soil, until he judged it safe to turn and make for a point at which, if he were cunning enough, he might intercept the tail of the procession. It was too much to hope that any scraps would have been left lying on the ground. Having changed direction he ran with all speed, stopped and listened, ran again, stopped and listened. Yes, he had struck their path. The main party was moving away from him, this way; the last stragglers were approaching him, that way. He knew them, the bad hunters, the greedy ones, eager to fill their own bellies at the tribe's expense. Foreign though they were, he counted, without thought, on their resembling his own people in this. So sure were his senses that he knew within a yard where they would pass him, and seeing a tree whose foliage overhung the spot went up it like a monkey and poised himself expectantly upon a sleek slim branch, clinging with his toes alone. The stranger came nearer, nearer; slowly and with frequent halts and gnawing at the large lump of boar's flesh he carried in his arms. There were others in his wake, and these others would be either more or less richly laden than he. As to that, Ogo dared spend no time in conjecture. He could smell the meat; he could see the man; he pounced fiercely. The stranger staggered and fell, with Ogo's fingers clutching his neck, and Ogo's knees fastened on his back. He uttered one piercing yell of astonishment and then was silent, wriggling and

rolling on the ground. He raised himself on one arm, pawed at the ground, once, twice, three times, and was on his feet again. Ogo clung like a cat. In a frenzy the strange man flung himself backwards, and Ogo, still clinging, fell with him. First his buttocks struck the ground, then his head; all the breath seemed to rush out of him in one gasp. His grip relaxed. But with the first movement of his enemy, the first beginning of a lightning-swift movement, he slid from under him, dodged a blow, felt for and found his axe, and struck. Between aiming and striking—one action—he caught his first glimpse of his enemy's face, long, large-eyed, hairy, smeared richly with the blood of that interrupted feast. After striking, and seeing the stranger fall loosely and lie still, he took no second glance but at once began searching for the spoil, his ears still intent for any sound of approach. The moon was not yet risen who sends long shafts and broad patches of brightness but makes shadows blacker. The world was dusky and quiet. But for his hunger Ogo would have been mastered by fear of the creeping presences about him; would have longed for light as he now longed for meat. All his being was gathered up and projected into this search, except that while he crawled and peered and touched, his mind filled with craving, his quick animal senses watched over him like sentries. The surrounding forest flowed into him in a series of smells and noises having each its own meaning. When he had found his meat, and set his teeth into it with savage lust,

he realized suddenly the significance of his victory, remembering that he had killed a man. He had killed a man, and the demon of that man was now with him in this dark forest. So began another search; for he did not at once recall where the dead body lay. He proceeded with infinite caution, shuddering with fear. It was necessary above all things that he should not come into physical contact with the body: the dead are taboo, and the taboo is contagious. Yet he must find it without delay, and by prayers and offerings placate the demon. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness, and a star or two came to light him, and to shew him a huddled corpse with shattered skull, staring eyes, and blood-besmeared agonized face. The mouth was open. The attitude accused him. Ogo went down on his knees and rocked himself to and fro with wailing lamentation. 'Noble stranger, forgive me. You were my enemy, but now you are my friend. See how I kneel and acknowledge you my friend. Do not be angry with me. I will do penance; I will serve you; you shall have the best of my meat.' With the flint of his axe he hacked off a choice morsel and thrust it reverently into the open mouth of the corpse. 'Let us be enemies no longer, O mighty one.'

The ceremony over, his fears momentarily stilled, he resumed his meal. But presently he caught the faint faraway sound of an approaching footfall. Something was coming: he knew it to be a man, and a lame man. He stopped eating. He glided

deep into the undergrowth and lay down with his face towards the approaching stranger, his chest resting on the meat, his axe ready to hand. He had blunted the cruel edge of his hunger and could now, for a while, give himself to watching and waiting.

There drifted into his mind a picture of Hawkon's woman, the woman called Flint; and the hidden motive of this adventuring began to invade his consciousness. What if the coming one should prove to be no man after all, but a woman. Fire ran in Ogo's veins. He forgot the lump of boar, cold and clammy, that the upper part of his body was resting on. He forgot his less than half-assuaged hunger; and forgot it not in a new bodily hunger but rather in a new sense of manhood, a proud resolve to go back to his tribe, as Hawkon had done, bringing a fine female for trophy. Until that should be accomplished he hated Hawkon with a hatred made sharper by frustrated love. But the newcomer was not a woman. He was a small, rat-faced fellow, and moved slowly, with evident pain but without sound, dragging a wounded foot that left a red trail in his wake. Ogo let him pass unchallenged and unmolested; and not till the rustle of his going had ceased did he conceive the idea of following him. This wounded man was on his way to a tribal squat. What else? And in that squat there must be women that a cunning one, with Hawkon's example to inflame him, might snatch and carry away. Following was an easy matter, even in the fast-gathering darkness. Ogo came out

of hiding, nosed for scent, found it. He was still encumbered by his booty, which he now carried slung across his shoulders ; but its strong smell did not confound him in this new quest. Man's blood is different. But he had not followed far before he became eager to overtake the stranger, and quickening his pace soon did so, he being so fleet and the stranger hampered by lameness. He came close upon him. The stranger turned at the sound of his step.

‘Not shout,’ urged Ogo in a husky whisper. ‘Not shout.’ He held high his axe, as a sign of power. He lowered it, fastened it again to his belt, and shewed his empty hands : a sign of peace. ‘We are friends,’ said Ogo.

The stranger, with a brief bark of terror, broke into a run ; was brought down by his wounded foot ; and at once overtaken. He knelt before his captor waiting dumbly for the axe to fall. His voice was silent, but his wide eyes screamed for him.

Ogo shook his head vigorously, thrust his face close to the stranger's, and grinned reassurance. ‘Not hurt you. We are friends. Ogo wants water.’ They stood face to face, mouthing and grimacing at each other in the dark. Ogo thought his captive a stupid fellow, for he had much ado to make him understand plain speech, and he had a tiresome trick, this foreigner, of repeating Ogo's words, slowly, as if trying them over, and then, with an insufferable air of correction, offering others in their place. But communication was established. ‘Ogo wants water. You bad foot. Ogo carry you.’ It was agreed. They were indeed friends.

CHAPTER 3

HAWKON SPEAKS WITH HIS WOMAN

THERE had been a time, within living memory, when the Koor family had subsisted entirely on the hunting and snaring of animals and on casual foraging for edible roots and fruits and fungus ; and the hunters were still, and likely to remain, the most powerful and privileged class. Agriculture, however, was now firmly established as something more than a fantastic experiment. The wild grasses had been coaxed and tamed ; the two natural terraces at the base of the Great Ox, the nearest of five surrounding hills, had been tilled and sown and cossetted with pious and bloody observances ; and the grain, during many seasons, had grown more sleek and abundant. At harvest-time even the great lords of the hunt would join their humbler brethren and for a while wield the flint sickle instead of axe and spear ; but in the threshing of the grain they took no part, and its grinding served to keep the women out of mischief. Other processes followed : some of the flour would be stored away in the clay pots which the women had learned to make, and some would be at once made into paste and baked in a covered pit filled with heated stones. At this point the interest of the hunters would revive. Some liked the stuff

to be soggy in the middle, with a hard outer crust ; others demanded that it should be hard and dry throughout ; but all found it a comfort to the belly, and a good deal better than nothing when lean times came. It was from a woman, captured by Koor himself in his more vigorous days, that they had learned the trick of agriculture ; she, coming of a people versed in such things, had been the first among them to hoard grain for sowing, and scatter it over a little patch of ground cleared and tilled by implements of her own making, flint-headed picks and spades of deerhorn. For this she had been accorded as much honour as a woman needs. She became the mother of many sons, and died in giving birth to Hawkon.

Hawkon, squatting at ease in his house, glanced at Flint and thought suddenly of Ogo. He was indulging in one of his rare moments of reflection. For as long as he could remember, the tribe of Koor had lived in this valley, though sometimes in dreams there came to him fragmentary pictures, derived from hearsay, of another squat, another valley, whence they had migrated. But he took small account of dreams, if only because for the most part he forgot them in the moment of waking. He lived not at all in the past ; a very little in the future ; most of all, in common with his kind, he lived in the present, which is action. Where he differed from most of his fellows was in the degree of his looking forward. They, with rare exceptions, could look no further than from the moment of waking to the moment of

sleep, and in practice seldom looked so far. From the kill to the feast, from the feast to the next hunt : this was the usual measure of their fancy. But Hawkon had greatness in him : his imagination, given rein, could range over tomorrow and even into the next day ; and, more than that, unknown to him, working secretly, it could carry him forward to a goal that he had never consciously aimed at. He was crafty as well as ambitious, but he was more ambitious than crafty. His ambition was a pure instinct, unhampered by intelligence. Every plan that formed in his mind he instantly translated into action. He was incapable of waiting. And because the obscure force working in him was always timely, never premature, in releasing an idea into his mind, he seldom made a mistake with consequences too big for his energy to override. Although young he was already a leader in the hunt, and he accepted his position without question, almost without noticing it. Even the dogs recognized his quality : the two best of them, swiftest and fiercest, followed him fondly wherever he went and would sleep nowhere but at his side. When his tongue was loosened he would boast indeed : but only as a child boasts, in a naive impersonal fashion, as though the deeds he celebrated were but distantly related to himself. It was so he thought of them, or so would have thought if he had thought of the matter at all. These things, though they had issued from him, were not in any intimate sense his : having happened, they belonged to the external world, the world of

action. Of the internal world he was unaware : its events, for him, were of one kind with the rest, or differing only in a degree that caused but momentary doubt and perplexity.

His latest exploit had brought him a higher prestige, and a deeper personal satisfaction, than he had ever known before. The woman Flint was a good woman : of that there could be no doubt. Hasta the Wise had asked and obtained the gods' approval of her ; Koor the Father had uttered the words of sanction ; and the tribe had received her with envious admiration. And so the alliance was sealed with the bond of law. Koor, being in his ripe age woefully short-sighted, could not see the woman clearly enough to desire her for himself ; moreover he had learnt the wisdom first of allowing, later of encouraging, such youthful enterprise as this of Hawkon's. For he was obscurely aware that, law or no law, every young man was his potential rival for the possession of the younger women, and the fact that he himself happened to be too feeble to enjoy his rights made him the more implacably jealous of their possible infringement. The young men themselves, all but Hawkon, secretly thought it very poor fun that Flint should be Hawkon's alone, when there was such a lamentable dearth of women ; but they kept their thoughts to themselves, and Hawkon, in his simplicity, never doubted that they were as pleased as he was. But to this there was one obvious exception. Even Hawkon could see that he had made an enemy of Ogo. And

though he had not foreseen this hostility, having in fact never given the problem of Ogo a moment's thought, it did not surprise him in the event. It was Ogo who had helped him to build this magnificent house, and had shared it with him ever since : a broad shallow trench, eight feet by six, paved with pebbles, carpeted with ferns and rushes, and sheltered by a roof of wattle and daub. A wall of piled slabs of stone surmounted the trench and doubled the height of the house, so that a man could stand upright under his own roof-tree ; and there were steps leading into it. That two people alone should have had the sole use of a house that could have sheltered ten is eloquent of the respect with which Hawkon was regarded in the tribe. For many moons he and Ogo and the two dogs had shared this house, and now, remembering Ogo, he missed him ; and the odd thought flashed into his mind that there would be no more of that queer agreeable talk with which Ogo had been wont to enliven the dark hours until sleep came. He will never sleep here again, thought Hawkon. And so, he went on, painfully thinking it all out, he will sleep somewhere else. His face cleared. His spasm of thinking was over. Ogo dropped back into oblivion.

With Ogo gone, there was room again in his mind for the woman he was staring at. He called her. She came obediently, and knelt, awaiting his pleasure. The only light in the room came from the small square aperture at the top of four rough-hewn steps leading to the outer world, and the woman's face

was in shadow. Hawkon seized her long black hair and pulled her nearer. He stared intently at her face ; and she, proudly, with a half-smile, gave back his stare. He was mightily pleased, and obscurely flattered, that she gave no sign of fearing him. From the first moment of her capture, that had delighted him. She had shewn fight but no fear. She had fought tigerishly, rousing anger in him. But the anger, his and hers, had been innocent of malice or hatred : and she had seemed, in the end, as proud in her defeat as he in his victory. They had now been together three days. His joy in her was fresh. The fire that had won her her name burned fiercely.

‘Listen,’ commanded Hawkon.

The half-smile vanished. The eyes widened. She was all listening.

‘This woman,’ said Hawkon—he touched her head, her feet—‘this woman is Hawkon’s woman.’

‘She is Hawkon’s woman,’ answered Flint solemnly : by which she meant : Hawkon is my man.

He grunted satisfaction and made her come nearer still. They began fondling each other. Every day since their coming together, and several times a day, Hawkon had demanded and received this assurance. He was not aware of repeating himself, and Flint was far from weary of his repetitions. She thought him the strongest, bravest, most desirable man in the world ; she thought him a very god among men. She also thought him likely to prove a better master than the man he had slain to get her. That one,

too, in his time, had been a god ; but now he was dead and forgotten. Enough of him. He was not to be compared with this wonderful Hawkon ; for Hawkon was alive, and though she did not know clearly what death meant she did know that between being dead and being alive there is all the difference in the world, especially when husbands are in question. Hawkon in her eyes was perfection, but for a certain uncouthness he had in common with his fellow tribesmen. This house he had brought her to was a good house, though she had lived in better. But its condition did not please her. Having by ample smiles and wondering gestures professed the greatest admiration for everything, she lost no time in making everything as different as possible. This was put there and that was put here. The whole place was drastically cleansed, so that Hawkon, returning after a day's absence, found himself ill at ease in it, and had to be cajoled into accepting the new order. Indeed she could not help making a wry face when she thought of the squalor he had been content with. But she was happy. She was wanted. And it was, after all, part of Hawkon's perfection that he so evidently needed looking after. This her heart knew, though she was racially too young, by about five thousand years, to have a mind capable of formulating such an idea.

Now, as they lay in each other's arms drowsy and satisfied, the woman's mind began receiving images of that former life of hers, in time so recent but in sensation so remote. And presently she became

restless in her lord's embrace. His arms, without his rousing, released her. He rolled over, snorted, and would have plunged more deeply into sleep, but the hands of the woman were busy waking him. She wanted to talk. And she was not unwilling to test her power over him by risking his displeasure. Gentler methods failing, she flung herself upon him with vigorous caresses. He woke suddenly, and started up.

'Huh?' His eyes turned to the doorway; his hand sought a weapon.

She soothed him. 'There is only Flint.'

He looked at her. 'Flint is my woman,' he remarked. His voice was truculent, but what it had uttered seemed to give him satisfaction in retrospect. His look, at first startled and angry, became amorous.

The woman laid her head in his lap. 'It is so,' she said. And after a moment's silence added: 'The sons of Koor are great. Hawkon is great.'

'Huh? It is so.'

'There is hunting here, and Hawkon is the great hunter. There is sowing and reaping of grain.'

Hawkon assented.

'But,' said Flint, 'there are no herds.'

'I don't know that talk,' answered Hawkon, after a long and thoughtful silence. 'That is strange talk.'

Flint made haste to propitiate him. 'My people are less than your people. There is no hunter like Hawkon. But my people have much

meat. My people have herds.'

'What is that?' asked Hawkon. The talk was boring him. It was silly talk. But the woman was lusty, round of limb, exciting. He made an effort to listen a while longer.

'My people have captured beasts alive. Of few they get many. So there is much meat. There is much meat to eat and much milk to drink. So I am fat.' She stroked her own arm. 'See? I am fat.'

She was talking over her lord's head. Her enthusiasm was carrying her away. In another moment he would jump up, kick her aside, and stride out in search of more manly conversation. But meanwhile he humoured her by asking: 'I don't know milk. What is milk? That is silly talk.' He shrugged his shoulders.

She tried to explain milk to him by pantomime, holding an imaginary child at her breast and with one hand squeezing the nipple between its eager gums. 'See? The young one. He takes milk from his mother.'

Poor Hawkon did not see. 'What young one?' He looked suspicious. The woman was playing tricks on him, was she? 'Where is he, this young one?'

'My people,' persisted Flint mulishly, 'take milk from their beasts. And so we are fat people.'

Hawkon looked at his woman no longer. His thoughts were elsewhere. He was rigid with listening. And when she spoke again he put his hand out and closed her mouth. Then, without noise,

he went to the doorway and stood watching it. Flint, equally silent, crept to his side, vigilant, submissive, ready for his commands.

‘There is a shadow across the doorway,’ said Hawkon, in a low tone.

She was silent.

‘It is Nigh the Tale-Bearer,’ said Hawkon.

The shadow moved, and was gone.

CHAPTER 4

THE OLD ONE CONFERS WITH HIS MINISTERS

THE man called Nigh was the official tale-bearer, or spy, in the tribe of Koor. His function, undisguised, was to gather scandal and bring it to the Old One. He was the eyes and ears of Koor, was indeed sometimes so styled : but the purpose he in practice best served was that of discouraging the lawless. With this fellow moving amongst them, one with them in blood but actively and ostentatiously in the service of the Old One, the sons of Koor were little tempted to transgress. Nigh was a figure-head, a moral force. It was an open secret that the real work of spying was done not by the tale-bearer himself but by others who carried tales to him. Who were these others ? Some had died violently : the rest remained anonymous, alive, and active. The squat was full of informers, habitual or casual. It might be you, or you, or you, that betrayed me. It might be my son, my daughter, or the friend of my bosom : for the danger of shielding a sinner, the punishment to be expected of the gods, was well known to everyone. There existed, therefore, a double incentive to righteousness, a double fear : fear of the gods, and fear of Koor's law, of which Nigh was the

slinking symbol. What Nigh heard, Koor would hear within the hour; what Koor heard, Hasta heard. These three constituted in effect the supreme council of state. In Koor was power; in Hasta was wisdom; in Nigh was everlasting watchfulness.

There was need of watching, and need of an executive council, in this primitive but not entirely simple society. Existence was complicated by many rules and prohibitions, some grounded in experience and serving the common weal, others quite arbitrary, queer mental antics incidental to the long protracted agony of a new birth. Slowly, grotesquely, the life in these people was struggling towards a new form. The animal was aspiring towards manhood, the savage to civilisation. Instinct was still lusty; but reason, newly born, was awake and crying. There were so many things that a man must do, and so many more that a man must not do. There was magic and counter-magic; spells, charms, incantations; blessing and cursing. Danger lurked in the most unexpected places, the most ordinary chance. Certain words, and particularly certain names, must not be spoken: euphemism and periphrase were essential constituents of everyday speech, and even the substituted words, if used too often in the same sense, became tainted by the unmentionables they hinted at. After words, the chief source of evil was woman; and, chief among women, those virgins who had reached puberty. If you chanced to tread, unknowingly, on a leaf or twig or blade of grass that since the sun's rising had been

in contact with one having the custom of women upon her, and she a virgin, you became unclean ; and nothing would suffice, for your own health and the tribe's, but that you should be isolated, shunned, and starved, for a period of three days. Married women were another matter : they were their husbands' responsibility, and the husbands were held to have a monopoly of the evils as well as the blessings associated with them—a provision that would have made the life of the great Koor himself, that much-married man, an enterprise of extraordinary delicacy, and of infinite hazard, had he not, with Hasta in perpetual attendance, protected himself from this, that, and the other, by a hundred and one several and powerful charms. Koor no doubt had his own troubles, but this was not one of them. For the other men of the tribe, his sons and grandsons, women were an ever-present peril. After puberty every man must be at pains, in respect of his father's wives and daughters, to avoid not only the major sin, but any other physical or social contact. His own mother, no less than his sisters, must become strange to him, to be addressed formally, and from a distance. Both the law and expediency suggested that he should be equally distant with his brothers' wives, but this law, though generally acknowledged and obeyed, had not for him the magical paralysing power of the more ancient law of sib. Nor were breaches of it, short of adultery, punished with the same severity ; since such breaches did not threaten Koor's privilege, except indirectly.

In such a community Nigh's office was no sinecure. Another in his place might well have been oppressed with a sense of his responsibilities. But Nigh, gliding back from Hawkon's house to make his report to the Old One, carried an all but blank mind. He had heard the voices ; he had more than surmised the embraces ; and these things had for the while excited him, making him grin in a troubled fashion, and roll his eyes, and bite his knuckles. But now, already, it was all forgotten. He was empty. His feet took him where, after a tour of the squat, they always took him. His lean curving shadow strode with him. He was an oldish man, in years not far short of thirty ; he stooped ; he breathed with the noise of a dog breathing. So much miscellaneous stuff had been poured through this sieve, so much hearsay and history, so much malice, so many bleeding scraps of his people's life, that of himself there was little left. Nature had made him sickly, and so a prey to fear ; habit had made him furtive and cruel ; his mental life at its meagre best was an obscene phantasmagoria ; what else there was of him eludes our scrutiny, being so small a spark so deeply hidden. Stooping, moving slantwise, and pawing the air in front of him as though he pulled at a rope, he carried his emptiness into the presence of his master the Old One, into that great house, that veritable nest of houses (for were there not three separate rooms of it ?) where Koor lived and ruled, served by his woman and protected by Hasta the wise eunuch.

Koor's squat—they had but one word to express the two things, the individual house and the encampment as a whole—was constructed on the same principle as Hawkon's and all others in the community; and though much bigger than his, its size, when considered in relation to the number of people it accommodated, was not impressive. Nor was the interior worthy of the majesty it contained. It was unbeautiful and unsavoury, or would have been considered so by such a woman as Flint, that fastidious one. Yet no one outside the household entered it without something of awe and fear: the awe of mysterious and complex origin, the fear more definite and rational. The large outer part, in which the Old One received such members of the family as were permitted to visit him, had been the scene of many an orgy, many a conference, many a judgement. Its mud floor was strewn with dead leaves, pebbles, and decaying grass; its walls were hung with animal skins imperfectly cured. At all seasons a fire burned or smouldered in the middle of the floor, the smoke escaping where it could. This was the tribal hearth, a symbol of great power, as well as a practical convenience to Koor, who in his old age suffered greatly from the cold. Near the fire, but not too near, he would sit, the Old One, with Hasta at hand, Nigh within reach, and perhaps one wife, supposedly the most devoted, squatting vigilant and adoring behind him. All other women, on these public occasions, were huddled away out of sight and left to meditate on their own unimportance.

Koor, today, was in a genial mood. His greeting was affable. He stopped munching, tore with his teeth a strip off the piece of meat he was engaged in eating, and handed it to Nigh with a grunt. Nigh received it eagerly, and the next few minutes were spent happily by father and son, while Hasta looked hungrily on. The last morsel swallowed, Koor's manner changed. He eyed his tale-bearer sharply, and uttered a single interrogative noise that was like a threat.

'Ugh?' said Koor.

'There is nothing,' answered Nigh. He seemed to plead with the old man. For, as always, he felt guilty and afraid, fancying that on his rounds he must have seen and forgotten a hundred misdemeanours. 'There is nothing.'

'What of that one?' Koor's eyes shone with inquisitorial lust. 'He stays?'

Nigh was at a loss. His glance fell. His hands fluttered. 'That one? Is it . . . is it . . . is it the young Hawkon?'

Raising his eyes fearfully he received a quick cruel blow in the face from his father's fist. He cowered, screaming with fear. He whimpered, and then was silent.

'The name must not be spoken,' remarked Hasta mildly. 'The name must not be spoken, or that one will hear us. Tell the father, O Nigh, what you have seen and heard of that one.'

'I saw him and heard him. He is with his woman.'

‘He stays?’ asked Koor again.

‘Yes. He is with his woman.’ He had already forgotten Koor’s castigation of him in recalling this earlier grievance, that Hawkon had a woman. ‘He stays.’

‘He does not go?’ There is nothing like making sure. But Koor’s question meant more than that.

‘If he goes, others go. There are comrades.’

‘If they go,’ said Koor . . . and was silent.

Not even to these intimates dared he say how glad he would be to see the last of these vigorous and enterprising young men. As hunters they were exceedingly valuable, but their existence had begun to trouble him. Their strength and skill were now a kind of insolence in his sight. And not they alone troubled him. He was beset by troubles on every side. The pains of his body, the weariness, the fears. Above all, the fears. He, the father, the Koor, was the greatest and strongest man in the tribe: in battle he could have killed any three of them in as many strokes: this was his creed and the creed of the tribe, and he dared admit in his mind no doubt of it. Moreover the gods were with him, working for his perpetual aggrandizement, protecting his person; and he in return served the gods by enforcing their laws. This was notorious, undeniable. But it did not comfort him. He was afraid. Every day he felt feebler in spirit; every day dreaded the least challenge to his authority; every day, to hide his fears from the sight of men, grew more greedy and testy and cruel. I am the Koor. They can’t touch

me. They fear me. I am sacred. I am strong. I am the mighty one in battle, the great hunter, the lord of my people. All these women, they are mine. This house is the biggest house. When I say kill, the man is already dead. They daren't touch me: I have good magic: the gods are my gods. Hasta says so, Hasta the wise one. . . . All day long, and sometimes half the night, his mind muttered these things; and at times his lips moved, too, without his knowing it. Mingled with his fears, fears none the less fearful for being shapeless, came fragmentary pictures of a vanished glory; but these, for the most part, he glanced at without recognition. They came and went quickly. Fear never went, except when driven away by appetite; and even then never went far. Fear watched for his waking, grinned him good day, and followed at his elbow like a sponging friend.

Koor shot glances this way and that: at Hasta the wise one, at Nigh the tale-bearer. They were afraid of him, and in their fear was solace and reassurance. His glance rested at last on Nigh, and became an angry stare. 'Is there any more to tell?' His tone was peremptory.

'There is nothing,' said Nigh.

'That one is a good hunter, eh?'

Nigh grunted affirmatively.

'Let him be careful what he's up to,' said Koor, with a fierce grin. 'I am Koor.'

CHAPTER 5

BIKKOO, THE FRIEND OF OGO, WORKS A STRANGE MAGIC

OGO, with the little rat-faced stranger in his arms, and a large lump of boar's flesh slung across his back, stamped through the dark forest, this way, that way, wherever the stranger directed. He had perforce to stamp, his legs being weak with much travelling, and his load heavy. The noise made by his progress inspired him with fear, and with a kind of guilt, for it did violence both to his instinct and to his hunter's habit. It seemed to him that the whole world of men must now be aware of his movements; from every side, in his fancy, suspicious eyes watched him. But all fears, though active, were subdued by his master-passion: he must have water. The taste of meat had sharpened his thirst; his throat was dry and burning; his head began sagging forward, with mouth open and hanging tongue. Sometimes he tottered for a step or two, and nearly fell; and then the man in his arms would gasp and clutch at him desperately. Ogo said nothing. He went on and on. Great bats zigzagged around him. He trod on darkness, a darkness that crackled or swished or squelched, a lurching billowy darkness, now up, now down. Bushes loomed suddenly in his path;

roots clutched his feet ; leafy boughs struck him with cold hands ; and once a gigantic bird rose up screaming before him and beat its way into the sky with a sound like creaking timber. An evil spirit, a dire omen ; but Ogo still went on. His thirst pressed forward, dragging the tired feet after it, the suffering mind, the burdened body. The pace became slower, and between one footfall and the next the sibilant quietude of the forest sang in his ears, and he could hear, with his mind's eye could see, against this background of listening silence, the stealthy rustle of small things escaping his menace. Moonlight, a pale pervasive ghost, came trickling in, creating a world of misty sculpture and clear-cut shadows. The stranger, at first and for a long while silent, now chattered without ceasing in his small rusty voice. It was this way, this way. There was water, good water, and they would soon reach it and drink of it and feast together. Ogo was good. They were friends and would share the meat and drink. Ogo was good and Bikkoo was good. Very good both, and good friends. So ran the stranger's talk : he was fast losing blood, and the grip of his fingers had weakened. At every second step Ogo felt a drop of liquid warmth spatter his own naked thigh and begin trickling down him. But he thought still of nothing but water. He did not waste himself in wondering how long the agony must continue. He was beyond hope and beyond despair. His mind was small and dim. Thirst filled him and he went dumbly on.

At last, and as it seemed abruptly, he came upon a dark river flowing through the forest with a gentle garrulousness. He stared in wonder; it was unexpected, almost incredible, being so much broader than any stream he had seen before. It was too broad for leaping, and too deep, he surmised, for wading. He laid his burden down in the lush grass of the river bank, and, stooping to the water with one hand clutching deep into the turf for support, he filled himself and slaked his fire. Everything became suddenly dark in his sight and swayed giddily about him. His eyes bulged; his body seemed ready to burst; there was thunder in his ears. He lay on his back in the grass, rolled over, writhed into a squatting posture, and vomited violently. After that he felt better and was ready for a meal. He glanced round for Bikkoo, who lay, a few strides distant, quite still and apparently sleeping. On his side Bikkoo lay, curled up, knees to chin; one arm, with open hand and wide-spread fingers, stiffly extended on the ground. He had not moved from the spot where Ogo had placed him. Ogo remembered the meat, which was still fastened across his back. He unslung it and fell to eating, and the night air soon began to seem less cold to him, though he would none the less have been glad of the shelter and the company that was now given to a strange woman, and gladder still, as the bright intentness of his eyes confessed when he thought of her, to be to that woman what Hawkon was, to be her lord and her mate, with Hawkon ousted and

ashamed ; but his musing mind did not dwell long on that past, which seemed so remote and unreal, for there were ten thousand things in the immediate world pressing for attention, the shadows and the silver, the trees, the grass, the river, the rustling night, the creeping presences, and the sharp eyes of the sky. These things, pouring on to his body, streaming in through ears and eyes and mouth and nostrils, made in his mind a pattern, which, changing as he stared, presently grew rich in promise of comfort ; for the earth he lay on became a woman, vastly proportioned, between whose mountainous breasts he found shelter and satisfaction. He felt upon him the glow of her great gentle eyes, saw the smile of her tenderness filling the sky, until darkness wrapped him round, warm soft swaddling protective darkness, in which he lay, curled up and at peace, soothed by the rhythm of her heart, which was the heart of the world.

But something moved into the stillness and instantly the forest crowded back. Bikkoo had raised himself on one elbow and was staring at Ogo. His face was shadowed, but there was no doubt of his staring. Ogo, without moving, watched him. What next ? Slowly, with pain, Bikkoo began dragging himself across the grass. Ogo stood up.

‘ Huh ? ’

‘ Very good friends,’ said Bikkoo.

Ogo grunted thoughtfully. He was rested, and but that it was still night he was satisfied. He had taken meat and drink, and there was more to take

when he wanted it. The hidden purpose of his first setting out was forgotten. Now and again it had flashed into consciousness, but for the most part it did its work in secret. At the moment he had no intentions of any kind. He was aware of no desires. Had he been alone he would have stayed where he was, idle, with his larder at hand, until roused from this comfortable lethargy by some want or whim. Bikkoo's presence prevented that. Bikkoo was a stranger and a problem. With Bikkoo he was instinctively watchful and alert: not with the alertness of hostility, for he judged the man to be helpless against him, but in a spirit of candid curiosity. Bikkoo was a stranger, different from the men Ogo knew. He looked different and was different: everything about him was odd and exciting. Instead of a wolf's pelt he wore round his middle a broad band of plaited grasses. Now would you believe it? His eyes, too, were somehow different from those of the Koor family; his nose was sharper; his brow broader. And, most astonishing of all, he had lived among alien people under an alien law, had never been inside the Koor squat. Small wonder that Ogo stared, noting with radiant excitement and satisfaction every detail of his queerness. Bikkoo, with equal frankness, stared back. It was an exhilarating experience for both of them. They grinned at each other with wide wondering grins. The tension of the night's terror was relieved. Ogo offered a piece of the meat, and Bikkoo received it eagerly, set his teeth into it, and laughed his appreciation. In the

act of eating he was funnier and more different than ever. Ogo was delighted with him.

After eating together they became a little talkative, finding that they possessed more words in common than had at first appeared, and these words went limping along supported on the crutches of a highly expressive and intelligible sign-language. Was Bikkoo going back to his tribe? He was not. Where was Bikkoo's tribe? It was somewhere: it was over there or over there. Was it a big tribe, and had they plenty of women? What kind of squats did they live in? Were the devils of the sky pleased with them? . . . There seemed no end to Ogo's inquisitiveness, once the subject was started. He was ready to talk of his own people, and so would have been puzzled by Bikkoo's reticence had he noticed it; but he did not notice it, his real interest being in Bikkoo himself, not in Bikkoo's unseen relations. To have inferred the existence of a Bikkoo tribe at all was a powerful feat, the leap of an exceptionally active mind: to dwell long on the idea, to give it body and detail, would have carried Ogo unnaturally far from the here and now, the world of immediate wants and satisfactions, in which he was most at home. But he asked one other question. 'Men hunting. Kill big beast. You belong to them?' He patted the meat that lay between them on the grass. For it was, after all, not Bikkoo alone, but Bikkoo in conjunction with those earlier events, the hunt and the kill, that had suggested to Ogo the existence of a foreign tribe and set his fancy groping

for a picture of its way of life. Or had these things only given shape to a nebula that had been already in his mind ; and was there, among his small crowding thoughts, one thought that without his knowledge took command of the others, pushing them this way and that, persuading, cajoling, grouping and drilling them, and urging them forward, with itself borne high in their midst, till the brain should no longer be able to endure their organised pressure but must release them, one host single in aim, back into the heart whence they had come as a crazy rabble, back into the blood, the glands, the nerves, the sinews, the whole physical man, and so into action ? His question about the women of Bikkoo's tribe had been but one of many, and put without any conscious ulterior motive ; nor had he listened with anxiety for the answer. As to those hunting men, Bikoo shook his head and his face was empty of guile. He had evidently seen and heard nothing of the hunt. ' My people bad people,' he confided. ' Not go back. They kill me.' He had run away. He was outcast. Ogo, liking him, both as an amusing novelty and because they had each rendered the other a service, believed without question that the tribe, not Bikkoo himself, was to blame for his having run away, though this idea, that in any conflict between tribe and individual the tribe as a whole could be ' bad ' and the individual ' good,' was the most astonishing heresy that had ever been presented to him. To Ogo, ' good ' was what the law of Koor ordained. Sometimes it happened to be also what he himself

wanted, but in general he was inclined towards being 'bad.' Fear of Koor and the terrible gods of Koor checked his unlawful inclinations, however, often before he became aware of them : his mind, as well as his body, was in thrall. Had it occurred to him that Bikkoo, being outcast, was perhaps taboo, a source of infinite danger, he would have been crazy with fear, would have gone through his whole small repertory of self-protective magic and exhausted himself in prayers of propitiation and in the performance of cleansing ritual. But no such doubts entered his mind. He was happy and friendly and well fed. His only conscious wish was that the night would quickly pass. In the intervals of chattering with Bikkoo he remembered the innumerable demons that infest darkness. Their shapes loomed hideous in his mind's eye. He shuddered, recalling the face of the man he had killed. He wanted to mention this matter to his companion, wanted to halve his fears by sharing them ; but he knew better than to attempt that, for to talk of demons in their own neighbourhood is to increase their malignity and power. So whenever a pang assailed him he did no more than stretch out his hand, and touch Bikkoo, and grin wistfully. And Bikkoo, seeming glad of these shy contacts, would grin back and say : ' Very good friends, huh ? ' He seemed to have quite forgotten his injured leg, but was reminded of it sharply enough when he tried to get up from the ground. Bikkoo in pain was an immensely funny sight to Ogo. When he fell moaning

to the ground Ogo laughed with pleasure in the diverting sight. It was the best joke in the world. But he came to his help none the less, hoisting him up carefully, and lending him a shoulder to lean on. In this he rendered service to himself as well as to Bikkoo, for he was anxious not to be left alone and feared that this strange little man, an inscrutable creature, might take it into his head to run off by himself. After repeated trial and failure Bikkoo found himself able to walk, with Ogo's help: and together they moved away, keeping close to the river. Ogo was excited and curious. Where was he being led? 'Bikkoo's boat,' answered Bikkoo again and again: an answer that Ogo could make nothing of, for he had never heard that word before; but presently they came upon the boat itself, and very cunningly hidden it was, afloat in a tiny natural kink in the river's serpentine body, and hidden from sight by a low drooping tree, a thick canopy, whose nether leaves, trailing the water, were tugged gently and without avail by the tide. Ogo was at some pains to see the boat, and when he saw it he did not understand. He saw a long dark shape, a log of which a substantial part had been hacked away, scooped out, by untold labour with an axe. What did it mean? He did not understand, but he was so near understanding that his eyes sparkled anew with excitement. 'Bikkoo's boat,' said Bikkoo again, and abandoning the support of Ogo's shoulder he seized an overhanging branch, swung lightly for a moment, and dropped. Ogo uttered little wonder-

ing cries, and stared at the miracle, half-afraid. Bikkoo sat in the boat; the boat still lay on the surface of the water. It was clearly magic. 'Come,' said Bikkoo. 'Ogo come too. Bring meat. Very good friends.' Ogo, clutching the meat to his breast, stared down at the man in the boat. In this little bay the river's flux was hardly perceptible: there was only a gentle lap-lapping against the boat's sides. The overhanging tree cast a dark shadow, in which the boat and Bikkoo made a shadow darker still; but beyond, where Ogo's glance travelled through gaps in the boughs, flakes of moonlight lay on the lithe water. It was magic. It was wizardry. Was it a magic he could learn, or would he invite the curse of the unseen if he went further with this wizard? This way and that he looked, drawn and repelled by the adventure that offered itself. But his indecision lasted no more than an instant, and now he was in the boat, having ventured the perilous leap, and he uttered a squeal to find it move, as though alive, under the impact. Bikkoo with a big bladed stick pushing off from the bank, Ogo swayed where he stood, tumbled backwards into the bottom of the boat, and shut his eyes in terror. He felt wet leaves lingeringly stroke his face, as the boat from its dark bower moved into mid-stream.

CHAPTER 6

THE FEASTING, THE DREAM OF STARE, AND THE RETURN OF A GREAT HUNTER

DUSK was fast gathering, and the tongues of flame that rose from the great open space in front of the Old One's squat, where the kill was roasting, sent tall shadows dancing against the sky. Shadows scarcely less tall, and even more actively fantastic, sketched and parodied the movements of the expectant crowd. Whenever the Koor hunters returned with their spoil there was rejoicing and chattering excitement throughout the squat. It was then that the domestic folk, the craftsmen and the scavengers, the tillers and delvers, the old and the lazy, felt most kindly towards these lordly and agile young men. Nor is it to be supposed that Koor himself, in his greatness, sat aloof and unmoved on such an occasion, waiting royally for his meal to be prepared and brought to him. On the contrary he would be there with the others, as soon as the word went round. He would be there, and conspicuously there, demanding and receiving all the choicest bits for himself. He would be there, with Nigh at his heel and Hasta at his elbow, and with his women flocking round him but careful, since they valued their lives, not to come between him and the food.

The awful presence of these three was on the whole a good and salutary thing for the tribe ; for, though it sharpened appetite at the expense of geniality, it also put a check on the worst excesses of greed and restricted to the dimensions of riot what might well have become a massacre. As soon as Koor, and after him Hasta and Nigh, had eaten as much as they could hold, and secured for future consumption as much as they could conceivably need until the next kill, they were ready enough to see justice done. After them would come the hunters themselves, the strong ones, who had therefore good reason, as well as proved ability, to protect the privilege and enforce the authority of the great three. Finally all who remained unfed were permitted to crowd round the communal roast and take what they could get, with such interference in the interests of equity as their masters had time or inclination for. These others included all women and children and all merely manual workers. The feasts varied in size and quality. Roast bear was good ; red deer was better ; boar was better still ; and wolf or beaver was better than nothing. Best of all by far, best and biggest, was the great ox. The hunting of the great ox was a tremendous and glorious affair, and the roasting of him an intoxicating spectacle, one that provoked singing, dancing, frantic laughter, playful fighting, and a general wantonness of demeanour. Nor were the eyes alone delighted. The nose, with an even greater rapture, received the good news. The mouth watered. The belly grew wistful, remember-

ing past joys. It was high festival indeed. In the great ox, moreover, there was spiritual as well as bodily nourishment ; for he was strong and fierce, a mighty warrior in defence of his cows, as was the cow in defence of her calves ; so that in eating him you were eating of this strength and this fierceness and making them your own. By the same token the flesh of a victorious rutting stag was doubly desirable, and that of his vanquished rival fit only for female consumption. Wolves were craven as well as cruel and treacherous, and so were resorted to only in times of famine. Frogs and newts and freshwater fishes gave of their slippery elusiveness ; birds of their quick hearing and swift flight. The snake was sacred and taboo.

But tonight there is nothing dubious about the feast, for the great ox is here, plain to see and to smell. Propped up on two forked stakes a few feet above the blazing logs, and dripping, alas, some of the best of his fat substance into the fire, he presents such a joyous spectacle that it is difficult to believe that he himself takes less pleasure in it than we do. The eyes of Koor shine with a rapture of anticipation. He feels wonderfully well and strong, and as young as the youngest of his grandchildren. And soon the feast is ready and he falls to, quite undeterred by the hungry and envious watchfulness of his family. He and his two counsellors stuff their skins tight, and the sign is given that the hunters may now approach. In a flash they are at work, and with them is a woman. Horror of horrors ! She is seized and flung back.

At the moment we have other things to do than punish women, or it would go hard with her. But what is this? She is back again, that woman. We are shocked. We cannot believe our eyes. Such devastating insolence is without precedent. We howl our execration and rush at her with our knives and axes waving.

‘Wahoooo!’ cried Flint. ‘I am Hawkon’s woman.’

The young men hesitated. The name of Hawkon held them in check. They growled, but they did not strike.

‘I take meat for my lord Hawkon,’ announced Flint, with superb arrogance. But she watched the men shrewdly, and was careful to take nothing. She waited to be served. In this her instinct chose wisely, for she could not have touched the ox again with impunity.

The elders gathered round. There was a hasty and angry conference.

‘Where is Hawkon himself?’ asked the hunters. And Koor, with gall in his heart, echoed the question.

‘He is still away,’ said Flint. ‘He is doing great deeds.’

Koor turned to the young men. ‘Did he go with you, this Hawkon?’

‘He came hunting with us. He killed with us. Then he left us.’

‘It is often so,’ added another.

‘He is a great hunter,’ said Stare, the youngest among them.

These were his friends and followers. They were united in their testimony.

'It may be,' said Hasta tentatively, 'that he has been bedevilled. I will consult the gods.'

'Do so,' ordered Koor.

'Meanwhile,' said Stare, 'we will give the woman what is his by right.' Without waiting for an answer he hacked a great slice from the animal and put it into Flint's hand. She had bewitched him. The nearness of her made him mad.

Koor, with a scream, rushed upon the young man, struck at him wildly, and failing of his aim fell to the ground. The young men laughed. Hasta and Nigh were at the Old One's side. He was on his feet again in an instant. He glared about him, and the laughter died away. One of his woman approached with obsequious love. He grinned at her, snarled, and felled her with a blow. Her outcry pleased him, restored him to good humour. He laughed, and everyone laughed with him, except Flint, who had vanished with her spoil, and the young men, who, resuming their meal, had already forgotten the untimely interruption. Stare alone kept it in mind for a while, but soon, in the pleasure of eating, he too forgot. The vehemence of his appetite subsiding, he squatted down on the ground within the circle of warmth radiating from the great fire, and occupied himself in gnawing at the few tough fragments of bone and gristle that remained to him of his share in the feast. He hardly noticed the noisy departure of his comrades and the chattering

arrival at the roast of the lower classes. He sat and gazed at the red embers. He was fed and drowsy and comfortable, and deaf and blind to the riot around him, for in the fire he saw a forest, and in the forest a man hunting. Stare's eyes became dreamily intent. The man in the forest crouched and crawled, followed by his two dogs. They had wind of the quarry, but the scent was elusive. Stare's heart thumped violently : he felt the man threatened by some as yet unseen danger, and with that thought a wild beast leaped out of the surrounding shadows, a fantastic wild beast all teeth and talons and blazing eyes. The dogs ran away howling. The man was torn to pieces and eaten. Stare moaned softly, and shifted on his haunches, trying to shake himself free of the dream. He remembered Flint, how she had stood within a hand's touch of him, her eyes bright, her face dusky in shadow, the round lithe contours of her body burnished and gleaming in the firelight. His mouth widened and his lips curled back, uncovering the teeth. But comfort and warmth drew him back into drowsiness. His eyes were glazing with the glow of the fire. And now he found himself stealing furtively towards the squat of his comrade Hawkon. In the doorway he hesitated, seeing a large black snake coiled up, and apparently asleep, on the top step. At once the snake awoke, and began uncoiling itself. It was a beautiful creature, sleek and shining ; and Stare felt a kind of tenderness gush in his heart as he watched it. Tenderness, and reverence as well ; for all beauty and all power were expressed in that

lithe shape. Yet he raised his axe to strike, victim of conflicting terrors. In some hidden way he felt that the snake was dangerous, so that he dared not let it live ; yet to kill it would be a terrible thing, bringing a curse upon him. In a frenzy he struck at it, battered it to death, reduced it to a shapeless nauseating mass, and woke with a shriek.

He thought no more of Flint, who at that moment stepped out of her squat, for the hundredth time that evening, to watch for the return of her lord. And now she was rewarded. He came at last, heralded by the noise of baying, and driving before him, with shouts and menacing antics, the source of the noise, a lusty hind. The animal's front legs were hobbled together, so that she moved with difficulty and could not run at all. She was all but exhausted with the daylong struggle to escape ; her baying, at first ferocious and continuous, was now plaintive and infrequent. She was weary and suffering and insulted ; her udder was bursting with milk, and the fawn that ran at her side could not reach the nipples while Hawkon relentlessly urged her on. Hawkon was too triumphant to feel his tiredness, though it was indeed the hardest day's work he had ever done. The capture of Flint had been child's play compared with this capture. He had first seen the animal early that morning : one of a herd which he had stalked with infinite skill and cunning, and had had leisure to watch. Most of the herd were placidly browsing, but one or two of the mothers among them were giving suck to their young, and at sight of

that the queerest notion, quite unforeseen, flashed into Hawkon's head. He could not for the life of him have told where it came from. And of that idea, instantly translated into action, this triumphant homecoming was the sequel. The hind could not learn submission, any more than her fawn could learn the wisdom of leaving its mother. The chase, the struggle, the capture and recapture, the binding and dragging and goading—it had been a conflict of epic dimensions. But Hawkon was as patient as nature. The whole of him was in his task, and he had not noticed the passing of time. And now he was back, with the dogs dragging themselves limply at his heels.

At sight of him and his capture Flint uttered a cry of wonder. He grunted and went into his squat, ignoring her. He was suddenly hungry. The hind, driven no longer, sank to the ground; the fawn began vigorously sucking. Flint, approaching her boldly, but careful to keep beyond reach of her jaws, stroked her steaming flanks. The hind turned her great violet eyes towards the woman, and it may be that the relief she felt, the comfort of having the milk drawn from her distended udder, became thereupon associated with the presence of Flint, who from that moment was no stranger to her. And presently Hawkon came out. He had found his meat and eaten of it, and only a sudden fear lest the hind should escape prevented his immediately sinking into sleep. Seeing Flint he was surprised. He had forgotten her. He became pleased with

her and proud of his exploit.

‘Hawkon is a great hunter,’ said Flint.

Hawkon waxed talkative and began to tell her how it had all happened. ‘And now,’ he finished, ‘we shall have milk.’ He drove the fawn away and tried to put himself in its place, receiving a kick in the face for his pains. He returned the kick with extreme violence. Flint soothed him.

‘Tomorrow,’ she assured him, ‘we shall take milk from this beast.’

‘And that one,’ said he, pointing to the fawn, ‘I shall eat. You shall have some too, because you are my woman.’ Then he told her the tale all over again. ‘We shall have milk,’ he pointed out, recalling attention to his idea. ‘I am clever and strong.’

Flint was all admiration. ‘You are great and very clever,’ she said. And paused a long while before adding: ‘We must tie the beast, lest it escape us in the night.’ She did not tell him what was also in her mind: that the fawn must not be killed tomorrow.

The talk turned on ways and means.

CHAPTER 7

OF A WOMAN AND A WEDDING, AND HOW OGO DROPPED HIS AXE

BIKKOO paddled his boat downstream, and Ogo sat marvelling. So easy was their motion, so intimate their conjunction with the river, that it seemed sometimes as if they were at rest, with the forest on both sides flowing past them. At other times the winding river was a snake on whose back they rode into the unknown. The demons of the forest were now, thought Ogo, held in check ; and it comforted him to be moving away from the one among them that he most feared, that of his slain enemy, whose face and staring eyes were more livid and vivid in retrospect than he had seen them in fact, and from whose mouth still protruded his peace-offering. Was the demon of the dead man placated ? Was the offering accepted ? Had the prayers availed ? Lacking a sign, he could not answer these terrifying questions ; and there was nothing for it but to yield himself humbly into the river's keeping, and with new prayers invoke the spirit of the river, that it might hide and protect him from the encompassing darkness. ' You are a kind river,' he said. So he believed, and was resolved to believe. ' You are kind. You are mighty. You are very big. You

will keep Ogo safe and not let them hurt him. I am Ogo and I will be your man. You are kind. You are big. I will be good and speak well of you wherever I go.' The spirit of the river made no audible response, but Ogo felt fortified by his prayers, and the fears of the night dwindled away. The wash of the cleft water soothed him, and the soft sheen pouring from the sky coloured his thoughts, till, with tiredness aiding, they became dreams.

Morning came like an answer to his prayers, bringing him sight of a new world and a world of new wonder, the sea. He saw it in the near distance ; at first, as his gaze followed the direction of Bikkoo's pointing finger, not to be distinguished from the red sky. He could not believe it to be water, but when, both having abandoned the boat, his companion led him to a high ground from which a vast horizon was visible, disbelief could not restrain his chattering excitement. Of fear now he knew nothing, for the pleasure that filled him was the pleasure of reassurance. The sky was kind ; the forest at his back was friendly ; and this new monster, the sea, was a good monster, quiet and well disposed to him. All this he believed to be sober truth. For him the world was personal : it was indeed a multitude of persons, who stood always in a perfectly definite relation to himself. Sometimes they were angry with him. The wind would screech, the trees would shake in their wrath, and the sky become black with fury ; and it was this malice in the storm, rather than its destructiveness, that made storms terrible.

Sometimes the sky was sulky and out of humour, sometimes playful, sometimes sleepily content and forgetful of him ; for he had as many moods, this changing sky, as any other god or man. But now, visibly and obviously, he was smiling ; the sleek sea was smiling too ; small freshets of wind hurried to and fro over the ground smelling the dewy fragrance of the grass ; and the forest (when Ogo looked back at it) trembled with pleasure in its own greenness. Ogo grinned greeting at everything he saw, feeling himself to be surrounded by a vast friendliness. Bikkoo seemed to share his pleasure, though not his surprise. Ogo's surprise, indeed, was largely the cause of Bikkoo's high spirits. The little man pointed proudly to the sea, as though he had made it himself. As he did so, Ogo uttered a little squeal and turned to run. Three strange black-bearded faces were peering at him over the cliff's edge ; three pairs of hands clawed the turf for support. Seeing themselves seen the strangers howled ferociously, and the row of faces lengthened. Hairy bodies and agile limbs appeared, with spears attached to them, and were lost to sight in the grass. The strange faces, all alike, came crawling quickly across the intervening ground. Ogo was already racing back towards the forest, dragging Bikkoo by the hand. But before they had gone many paces his companion's grip tightened and tugged at him, and Ogo was pulled to a standstill to see the little man stagger backwards, with upflung arms, impaling himself upon a spear that had transfixed him in the small of the back.

Ogo, after one glance at the writhing body, tore the spear out, and turned desperately towards the enemy. He hurled the spear at the nearest face. It entered the open exultant mouth and the man fell choking. Bikkoo writhed no longer, but lay, a loose heap, in his own blood. Ogo ran on alone, making for the boat.

It was a homing instinct that took him to the boat, for the boat was associated in his mind with safety and peace and quiet dreams. But, as he remembered only just in time, it was also associated with Bikkoo. Therefore to enter it, to touch it, would be the craziest folly. Bikkoo was dead: a friend had become a demon, and hostile. For the dead are lonely and resentful. They lust after the lost delight of living, and seek, in envy of our felicity, to draw us after them into the everlasting night. They cannot forgive us for being alive when they are dead. They hold us, indeed, guilty of their death, and we ourselves, though it be against all reason, feel twinges of doubt and remorse. We did not contrive it, but could we not perhaps have prevented it, and aren't we in some obscure fashion profiting by it? Ogo was innocent enough. Even in the terror of being hunted he could grieve that his friend was lost to him. But his conscience was guilty: the belief was deep-rooted that the dead had a grudge against him, and against all living souls. So Bikkoo's boat, by means of which he could perhaps have put the river between himself and his pursuers, must not be touched. But, though they were close at his

heels, he was already hidden by trees from even the foremost of his enemies ; and now with new hope he gave himself to the task of running. He ran on and on : at first with the mounting speed of frenzy, but later, his fears subsiding, at a swift unvarying pace. Running became a habit, effortless and unnoticed ; and morning had already half spent itself before he lay down to rest. He was deep in the forest. His surroundings were strange to him. There was no sound of following feet.

Noon came and passed. Dusk fell. With darkness all his old terrors came creeping upon him. That he had eaten nothing since daybreak, the meat having been abandoned with the boat, was no great matter ; for it often happened that he went for days without food and suffered no harm. By now he had forgotten his pursuers, remembering only the wild beasts of the forest, and the still wilder demons. He remembered Bikkoo and began chattering prayers at him. 'Very good friends, Bikkoo. Don't be angry with me. Don't hate me. Don't follow me. Go away. Very good friends.' He hoped that Bikkoo might be cajoled into good humour by this repetition of his own favourite phrase. For a long while he dared not abandon his body to sleep, lest, while it lay empty, the soul being away on its wanderings, it should be entered and possessed by the homeless spirit of the dead man ; for there is no end to the malice and cunning of demons. But at length for very weariness he crawled into the deep obscurity of the undergrowth and made himself a

nest for the night. By great good luck he had come upon a stream, whose voice, cool and clear like the voice of a small warbling bird, reached him still where he lay curled up on a bed of bracken. He slept lightly, easily, with ears awake, and rising at the first beginning of day resumed his eager aimless journeying. He drank deep of the stream and felt fresh and strong, but hunger sent him searching for food until he found a nest of mice. That was good eating indeed, and a handful of fungus went well with it. He made a good meal.

And now a kind of panic possessed him, driving him on and on : not the panic of being pursued by murderous faces, but a driving desire for humankind. He began to hope again for the sight and company of a strange people. At noon that day he saw a woman, idle and listless, sauntering inadvertently towards him. Not till he was within a few strides of her did she notice his step and look up. Taken unawares she gave one glance, and ran. She had uttered no word or cry. Fear was quick in her. She was small and nimble ; her grace and fleetness made his pulse leap joyfully. The pursuit was brief and silent. He caught her by the shoulder, and she turned and flung herself at him. Her nails tore at his face, and her teeth drew blood from his fingers, but the trivial pain of these injuries did not for an instant distract him from his purpose. Soon she was powerless in his grasp, her bosom heaving, her nostrils dilated. To feel the life that moved in her made him mad. He bore her to the ground. Her resistance was at an

end. The terror that spoke in her eyes edged his desire, but when he had had his will of her another and a strange feeling woke in his heart. She was shaking with sobs, and her sobs hurt him. He knelt at her side and gazed down with puzzled eyes, unaware that it was not she, but the mystery of his own compassion, that puzzled him. He was all bewilderment, his first proud sense of triumph and fulfilment having dwindled away. This girl by some magic was putting her pain into him. He wanted to comfort her, but he did not know that he wanted it. His tenderness was dumb: he could only stare stupidly, and wait till her grief should have spent itself. From time to time he grunted interrogatively. 'Ugh? Ugh?' His questions availed nothing, and at last, unable to bear his pity any longer, he lifted his hand to strike her. She, with a little moan, flung out her own hand to meet it. Her clinging fingers constrained him downwards till his face lay close to her own; her arms came round his neck. She lay moaning, her terror unsubdued. And now Ogo, in sympathy, moaned with her. But this queer terror of hers disconcerted him, so that he was very ready to be angry again. Its persistence thwarted him of a triumph more subtle than that of physical possession, a triumph whose nature he could not even dimly conceive, though he felt the lack of it: he was unaware that until he could know himself pleasing to this woman of whom he had had pleasure, his heart must remain unsatisfied of its deepest desire. But in time she became quieter, and

finally she was silent and still. He spoke to her ; grinned ; searched her face for an answer.

‘We are sib,’ she said. Her voice was harsh with despair.

He leaped to his feet. He stared down at her with fear and sudden loathing. ‘It is not.’

‘It is so,’ she answered coldly. ‘We are sib.’

He beat his breast, raving aloud. ‘Who are you?’

‘I am called Wooma. I am the daughter of the daughter of Koor. And you are a son of Koor.’

‘I don’t know you.’ Ogo, fiercely calm again, fought against the fact and the curse that confronted him. ‘I’ve never seen you.’

‘I have seen you, but I have kept my face to the ground as a woman must.’

‘It is not,’ said Ogo. ‘You are not a daughter of Koor. You are a strange woman, and you have magic that tells you these things.’ But he did not believe what he said, and seeing her unmoved by his accusation he fell into despair. ‘We are sib?’ he asked.

‘It is so.’

‘Then I shall kill you.’

He snatched up his axe, which lay on the ground attached to his discarded belt ; and if the girl had moved to escape he would have given chase and killed her in hot blood. But her movement was one not of escape but of willing acquiescence. Supporting herself on her long supple arms, she raised her body towards him, offering, with head flung back,

the full pointed breasts and the living throat. He was checked, and again puzzled. He uttered an inarticulate noise, half question, half menace ; and watched for her to shrink, writhe out of reach, and run. She did not move. They stayed so, mute and motionless, like sculpture, till, dropping the axe, with a low growl he straddled across her, seized the lithe column of her body in his arms, and set his teeth amorously in the soft flesh of her shoulder. She screamed briefly. Her arms enfolded him. He raised his head and looked long into her wild eyes.

‘I shall not kill you,’ he said. ‘You are my woman.’

Her eyes filled with glory. ‘Lord, I am you,’ she answered.

The wedding was intimate and radiant, fire with fire. Having broken the sacred law, they were accurst, and lay naked to the vengeance of gods and men. But, since nothing could alter that, since there was no avoiding the doom, the shame that might have divided them was a bond drawing them closer together. In the tragic isolation of this shame they were made indissolubly one ; for each to the other was the sole refuge in a world grown suddenly hostile. In their fancy the sun eyed them with burning accusation and the air shrank from the infection of their sin. Danger was all about them ; destruction was certain ; and their delight in each other was the sharper because it must be brief, a snatched instant of eternity. It was not long before the cloud of terror came back into Ogo’s eyes. He

was thinking perhaps of the story of Strong, another of the friends and followers of Hawkon : Strong the hunter who, being pursued and tempted in the forest by a forbidden woman, had driven his spear through her throat, so preserving his virtue and winning the applause of all the tribe. A shining example, but one that it was too late for Ogo to think of following. His glance returning to Wooma, he was surprised again by a feeling he could neither understand nor express. His hand touched her. They bared their teeth at each other and gazed with bright eyes.

Presently he began asking questions.

‘I took milk from the deer that Hawkon has,’ answered Wooma. ‘And the woman Flint caught me and beat me. So I ran away here, into the forest, to escape her, and to make magic against her.’

‘You have magic?’ Ogo was awed, and a little repelled. The rest of her tale had passed over his head. Milk from the deer—what crazy talk is this? But magic—that is familiar enough. And dangerous.

‘No.’ Wooma was quick to see his shrinking. ‘I am Wooma. I have no magic of my own. But I found Flint hopping in the likeness of a frog, and I killed her. I said, This frog is not a frog : it is the woman Flint that Hawkon has taken. And I beat her with a stone like this, three times. So now Flint is dead and Wooma is afraid to go back.’

Ogo shuddered, and looked about him uneasily. ‘Where is this place? Where is the Koor?’

She pointed to the shadow of the tree they sat under. 'See, lord, the dark ghost of the tree.' She pointed to a near bush. 'See, lord, the bush.'

'I see them,' assented Ogo.

'When the dark ghost has crawled to the bush, and touches him, we are in the squat of Koor.'

'I am thirsty,' said Ogo. He could not believe that Koor's squat was so near, a mere hour's journey ; for his surroundings were unfamiliar. He was suspicious of Wooma, but answered her nothing. 'I am thirsty.'

She rose, and stretched out her hand, and led him to the slope of a green hill dotted with juniper bushes. To us, who watch, the scene may suggest an ancient map, with stiff little trees pictured in black upon a yellow ground, dolphins riding the sea, and at the base of this particular hill three words of flowing script to tell us that here a spring gushes. It pleased Ogo, when he had quenched his thirst at this spring, to climb the hillside in search of he knew not what. Perhaps it was in his mind, though not in his consciousness, that a man might lie up there, in the shadow of a juniper bush, and be secure from a surprise attack. He was glad to be out of reach of those tall forest trees, and took pleasure in the fading brightness that lay on the grassy slope. Each small blade and spear cast its individual shadow—faint pencillings on a green and golden quilt. Ogo and Wooma lay quiet in each other's arms, forgetful of danger. A rabbit, within a spear's length of the bush that sheltered them, came out of his burrow

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and listened. The shadow of the bush grew longer. It was the hour of stillness and mellowing light, the pause between day and dark, when colours deepen under the varnish of sunset, and the voices of birds, calling infrequently a belated phrase, assume the clarity and remoteness of familiar legend. In the west, the gold of the sky gradually darkened to red. The sun spilled himself on the horizon. For a moment the lovers turned from each other to stare at this dying and immortal majesty. To Ogo the sight was full of meaning and portent, as always ; but now a hint of new meaning was mingled with the old. An emotion stirred in him that was neither fear nor desire. His child mind became full of questions, and in this woman, or in something that made this woman mysteriously himself, he seemed to find the hint of an answer. In the having of her there was not only pleasure and power, but a third joy, release ; and these three now were fused for Ogo in the emotion that man, in later childhood, has called beauty. Ogo laid a light hand on her bosom, then pointed towards the sky, trying to express his sense of some quality shared by these two objects of his love. But the thought, the feeling, was inarticulate. Responding to his caress, Wooma grinned lovingly. His face remained grave, his eyes full of the question that filled his heart. He was aware of a vital need : he wanted to give himself utterly to this woman, to pour out his life at her feet as the sun-god poured the blood of his splendour on the far edge of the world.

He came very close to her and spoke in her ear. 'Listen,' he said. 'You are my woman. You are Ogo and I am Wooma. Listen. I will tell you my name.'

CHAPTER 8

THE HERD CALLS AND THE LOVERS ANSWER

OGO's shame was too radical a growth to die : it went on existing side by side with this new exultant feeling of release and fulfilment. There was room in him for these contradictions : his mind, because he never looked into it, accommodated them without the smallest difficulty. And at present, with Wooma at hand to see and touch, joy was uppermost. He was not even now capable of questioning the rightness of the law that condemned him ; and yesterday, in the first onset of his despair, the mere instinct of gregariousness and the driving torment of guilt might have sent him back to Koor and to death. He had not in that moment doubted that he must suffer the penalty of his crime ; nor even, so profound his identity with the tribe, wished to do so. But with the going down of the sun, the long warm night of friendliness and love, and the waking that found beauty still in his arms, the scope and direction of his being were imperceptibly changed. Shame, not repudiated, was forgotten. Pride lifted his head. Towards the world in general he felt masterful ; towards Wooma he felt, not only swaggeringly possessive, but patrimaternal, as though she had been, as no doubt his idea of her was, a very part of

himself, child begotten and born of his conscious and unconscious desires. The penalties he and she had incurred were well known to him : for the man, death ; for the woman, mutilation, and a banishment that in practice amounted to death. Except at the seedtime sacrifice, when the earth-god demanded the blood of a ripe virgin, the killing of a woman after puberty was of bad omen : it was sufficient that the offending female should be formally cast out, with the curse of Hasta on her head, and driven with spears into the wild, so that she might carry her contamination to a foreign people, or, as was more probable, be eaten by wolves or die of starvation and the terror of the curse. This was the fate that Ogo feared for Wooma ; for though it was all a matter of tradition and hearsay, no event of the kind being in his personal memory, there were tales in plenty, a body of sacred legend, to give force and shape to his imaginings. It was necessary therefore that he should take Wooma as far as possible away from the Koor squat. As for himself, he was enlarged and completed in this woman, and his appetite for life was doubled.

Of these facts however—especially of the need for flight—he was something less than conscious, except in fleeting moments of alarm. With even more decision than usual, the present—its needs and its joys—occupied him to the exclusion of remote dangers ; and when he and Wooma had come down from their high place, and foraged for food, and caught a young rabbit and shared it, they turned their

attention again to each other and spent the morning in idle amorous play. Yesterday and its terrors seemed far away indeed : the new life alone was real. The gods having not yet stricken them, they had forgotten the gods. Yet pictures that might at any moment become plans were forming in Ogo's mind. He fell into a long silence.

'What are you seeing?' asked Wooma. Silence she could endure, but not pensiveness. It troubled her that he should have thoughts secret from her. 'What are you seeing, Ogo? Wooma is here.'

'I am seeing a river,' said Ogo, 'with many fishes in it that a man might catch with his hands. I am seeing a small squat near this river, and a man and a woman eating the fishes.'

'The man is Ogo. And the woman is Wooma, his woman.'

'It is so.'

He continued his daydreaming. The door of the squat opened towards the river. There was the forest for hunting in and the river for escape. And at the river's end there was the sea.

Wooma searched his face. 'What are you seeing now?' she asked anxiously.

'I am seeing a tree strook down by the man's axe. The tree groans, and the tree's demon is angry. But the man is not afraid. He is mighty. He is fearless.'

'The man is Ogo,' affirmed Wooma.

'It is so. With his axe the man strips the tree of its waving arms. The tree has a fat body and now it

is naked. Many days and many darks the man works with his axe at the tree. He is making a boat.'

Wooma said nothing. Her face assumed the fixed grin of incomprehension, and she stared at the ground.

'And now,' said Ogo excitedly, 'the boat is on the top of the water, and the man is sitting in it. He beats the water with a flat stick, and the boat swims away.' Ogo laughed with pleasure and glanced at Wooma for applause. Her face was downcast. 'Ugh?' he said. He was puzzled and his tone impatient.

'Lord!' She nestled closer, and looked timidly up at him.

Ogo sat rigid and sulky. 'Doesn't it please you, what I am seeing?'

Her face crumpled with grief. 'Lord,' she wailed, 'at first you were seeing a man and a woman. Now you are seeing only a man.'

'Ugh?' He was baffled. 'Ah!' He understood. 'But the woman is there too, my soul. She is in the boat. She is Wooma.' He bit her ear tenderly, and she was happy again. But she asked him no more about his thoughts. He had been already too long away from her. She was lonely, neglected, jealous. Wanting nothing but him, her heart demanded that he should want nothing but her.

Ogo resumed his thoughts and the recitation of them, his body swaying and his voice rising and falling in a chant. 'Ogo and Wooma are in the boat, and the boat is a bird flying on the water.'

The spirit of the river is noble and kind. He is very big, but he speaks in a little voice, and Ogo is his friend. Ogo is his friend and he is the friend of Wooma. Ogo and Wooma are in the boat. They ride on the river's back and the demons of the forest cannot catch them. The sun smiles on the river. He laughs and is friendly. The sun and the river laugh together. The man shouts with a loud noise and the woman claps her hands. Ogo and Wooma are in the boat. Ogo and Wooma are joined with the boat in flight. The wind runs to meet them, and because the river is good and mighty the wind lets them pass. So they come to a great water at the end of the world. It is a good water, and the sky is a good sky, and the water and the sky touch each other and are friends. The man and the woman and the boat—'

She gripped his arm in a fierce grip. 'There are men coming.'

They jumped up, looking round for a hiding place.

'There are dogs with them,' said Ogo. That meant that unless the dogs had already scented quarry, no hiding-place would shelter the lovers for many seconds. 'Where is my axe?' he cried (for the axe still lay where he had dropped it twelve hours ago). They stared at each other wildly, and already there was distance between them. The steps came nearer; and now to the dogs' barking was added the sound of human voices. These sounds reminded the lovers of what they had put out of mind. They

remembered the law of sib, and each to the other became tainted with the terror of the curse : the spirit of the herd mastered and divided them. They ran in different directions. Wooma went first, Ogo watching her in stupid despair. Then he crawled into the undergrowth. The conflict of impulses made him numb. His hiding was purposeless and half-reluctant. And when from his cover he saw the young man Stare approach, he shouted a greeting and moved forward to meet him. Burning with guilt, he was surprised at Stare's quiet acceptance of him. 'There's good hunting,' said Stare. 'Come on.' He had not seen Ogo for many days. Ogo had been away and forgotten. Now he was back. 'Where've you been?' asked Stare. But there was hunting afoot ; the others, half hidden by trees, were pressing forward ; and he did not wait to be answered. He went on, and Ogo followed him.

Wooma, out of reach and hearing, flung herself down. She lay sobbing, raging with grief. She hated Ogo and wanted him. That last sight of him, when she had seen Koor looking out of his eyes, shone luridly in her memory. The same shrinking distaste, born of fear, had been legible in her own glance. But that she did not know or remember. The law in itself, being a man's law given by man's gods, had less hold on her than on him. For him it had a mysterious inward power ; for her it was something external that had to be obeyed. Not since his avowal of yesterday, that she was his woman, had she had a moment's shame until now ; since that

high peak of her life he had been, for her, both law and conscience. And now he had accused and condemned her and with one look cast her out. Having exhausted herself with weeping she lay quiet and numbed for many hours ; then rose and wandered aimlessly, without hope, until the forest began filling with the red glow of sunset. The hour came charged so richly and cruelly with reminiscence that sorrow shook her again. And the threat of darkness terrified her. She pictured the returning hunters, with Ogo, forgetful of her, in their midst ; she saw the shadows gathering to enclose her ; and her feet began following where her heart had already gone. She was very young, a child ; she had been companioned only by women jealous of her budding loveliness, and touched by no man except Ogo. But the squat of the tribe was her home ; the valley was friendly ; and the shape of the surrounding hills was like a lyric in her memory. And now, she surmised, Ogo was there ; and to be near Ogo was necessary to life ; for, till the next man claimed her, she was his alone. She forgot Flint's malice and the vengeance she had taken upon Flint. She forgot Koor and his laws. The forest with every passing moment grew more dim and dreadful, and she ran faster and faster, calling on Ogo to save her. There came no answer, but when at last she descended the familiar hill, and emerged from the forest that covered it, she gained new heart, seeing that there was still light in the sky, and knowing herself back among her own people. Trembling, but dry-eyed and quiet, and keeping to

the edge of the two broad terraces of tilth at the base of the hill, she ran lightly into the valley and across the clearing in the direction of the women's quarters. In the doorway of Koor's squat, which she must pass on her way, crouched a dark motionless figure, Nigh the Tale-Bearer. He grinned as he watched her, and moistened his lips. But he made no sound, and she went by without seeing him.

CHAPTER 9

OGO IS BETRAYED BY HIS FRENZY, WITH NIGH AIDING

SEVEN days passed before Ogo and Wooma set eyes on each other again, days in which, for Ogo, all that had happened in the forest seemed like a dream. It was not the less real for that, but it belonged to a different order of reality. Back among his own people, accepted by them, and taking his place once more in the hunt and the common life, he almost believed at last that it was his soul, which he pictured as another body, a shadowy duplicate of himself, that had had those experiences while he had lain asleep. The wandering, the slaying, the meeting with Bikkoo, the wooing of Wooma : all this belonged to another world, which he could re-enter only in sleep and then only by chance. He was not easy ; he was intimately changed ; but for the while he was able to move without overmuch difficulty or danger in his accustomed social groove. He had moments of strange absent-ness, when silence fell upon him and his eyes stared wonderingly into a far distance ; but at other times he talked much, and quickly won a reputation for story-telling. All that could be safely told he told freely and in graphic detail, with a great wealth of mimicry and gesture. He even claimed to have met and possessed a strange woman ; but this part of the

tale no one believed. 'Where is she, this woman?' demanded Hawkon, with curling lip; and Ogo's account of how she had escaped him while he slept exposed him to jeers and to polite grins that were harder to bear than jeers. In this way he learned the wisdom of confining his story within more credible bounds, telling the whole truth about the boar hunt, the man slain, Bikkoo, the river magic, and his first sight of the sea, with such additions as fancy suggested to him. He told his stories again and again; they became richer and stranger with each telling. He made songs and chanted them, and others chanted with him. By the exercise of his unsuspected talents he won many hearts, even the Old One himself taking pleasure in the entertainment. He was active, talkative, brimming over with his own cleverness. But somewhere within him was an ache he would not heed, a silence, a bottomless pit of sorrow and hunger; somewhere in his heart the thing that he had never told, and did not think of, lay coiled like a snake ready to rise and strike him.

With Wooma it was otherwise. For her the life with Ogo in the forest, brief though it had been, was the true and continuing reality, and these days of dearth, with women eyeing her suspiciously and scolding her to work, and Koor the all-powerful and all-capricious a vast shadow in the background, were nothing but a nightmare suspension of that life, a dream imposed. She was waiting but not expectant. She waited, without hope, for something to happen that should set her heart beating again. She was not

so crazy as to think that Ogo would claim her and steal her away from the tribe : nor could she have planned so far ahead. For the most part she chose to believe herself rejected and forgotten by Ogo, and did believe it, immersing herself almost ecstatically in the humiliation of it, except in moments when his parting look grew dim and faded on the screen of her memory, giving place to images of love. Many rumours of him reached her ears : of his hunting, his gaiety, his stories and songs. She wondered at these things and rejoiced in them, appropriating some of the praise to herself who was part of him, feeling his exploits to be in some sense her own ; but side by side with this flame of love, this pride that was like a mother's pride, there burned a hatred engendered by her frustrated desire. The pretence that he was hers did not suffice to allay her murderous resentment when she remembered that he had forced her, won her heart, and at last turned against her. Now he was happy, and she was nothing. She came at times within an ace of conceiving the idea of denouncing him to Koor, at whatever cost to herself. Yet at other times she was all humility and submission, thrust deeper into her heart the knife he had pierced her with, and cried, luxuriating in pain : Ogo is great, Ogo is cruel, and Wooma is nothing to him ; Ogo is proud, and Wooma is trodden under foot. In this abjection she found an obscure pride.

It was in returning from the hunt with Hawkon and his comrades that Ogo next saw her. She, with other women, was at work on the lower terrace,

breaking the ground with a flint-headed pick. As he neared her she straightened her bent back and looked at him with steady challenging eyes. Taken unawares, he halted and gazed back. Recognition flashed between them. For Ogo, because he had put her out of mind, the sight of her was overwhelming. Light blazed in him; the drums of war began beating in his blood: the unuttered homesickness of his heart vanished in promise of appeasement: and with a cry he ran towards her. An answering cry of horror checked him; he remembered his surroundings, and, drooping where he stood, watched her turn quickly her back on him and resume her work. Someone put a rough hand on him, and he started round to find Stare grasping his shoulder. Stare's eyes were anxious. 'Where're you going, brother? You come with Stare.' There was accusation as well as question in his look, and Ogo met it with bewilderment. Since Ogo's return to the tribe these two had been much together: there was affection between them. Ogo longed to ease himself of his burden, but he dared not utter the words that would make his friend shrink back in fear and loathing. So in silence he suffered himself to be led away. No more was said; the secret remained with him as far as he knew; but the precarious peace of his existence was shattered, for Wooma in that instant had returned and invaded him and now filled him with the fire of agony and bliss. He was distraught, not knowing how he could live without her, feeling indeed that he was already dying for lack

of her. He lay in his corner of the squat and gave himself up to sickness. Stare watched and derided him and brought him food, knowing nothing of his trouble. Ogo sulked and would not eat. It seemed that a madness had come upon him: a rumour that brought many visitors to stare at him with religious awe. Hasta came, scenting rivalry; for in madness, which is a sign of peculiar attention from the gods, a man may speak and do magic. And Nigh came, curious to learn the truth of a matter that had provoked so many fantastic tales. Ogo was dumb and would not eat. He sat rigid, seeing and hearing nothing. It was Nigh himself who, after many days, led him out of this trance.

‘Through the mouth of Hasta the Wise One the gods have spoken,’ said Nigh, rehearsing a ritual.

‘Through my mouth,’ said Hasta, ‘they have chosen the woman for the sowing...’

‘By my hand,’ said Nigh, ‘she shall be slain, and her blood scattered.’

‘So,’ chanted Hasta, ‘will the earth-god be won to favour. The sky will smile and send water to quench him; the grain will swell in the dark womb; and the harvest will be plentiful for all the sons of Koor.’

‘It is so,’ murmured the young men reverently.

Ogo alone remained silent.

Nigh kneeled before him, seized his shoulders, and peered into his eyes. ‘Listen, brother! The gods have chosen a woman for the sowing. She is young and holy. No man has touched her. She is a

daughter of a daughter of Koor our master, and she is called Wooma.'

A shudder passed through the squatting body of Ogo. A deep sigh escaped him, and it was as if he woke out of sleep. Light came back into his eyes. He looked round in wonder. 'Wooma? Where is Wooma?'

The chattering that had begun with his movement ceased at his words. The silence of awestruck conjecture fell upon the company. Triumph and malice shone in the eyes of Nigh. A vague satisfied smile visited Hasta's lips.

'Wooma,' repeated Nigh, still peering at the patient. 'Young and holy, and no man has touched her.'

'Who is this Wooma?' asked Ogo, on the defensive. 'And what of her?'

With much particularity Nigh and Hasta told once more of the fate designed for Wooma: the Wise One with unction, the Tale-Bearer with relish. For to Nigh, of all his duties, this slaying of a virgin was the most congenial.

Ogo heard them in silence, and when they had ended he sat thinking and staring at distance. Nigh, for reasons of his own, watched him narrowly. The others watched because Nigh watched, and because already they scented a monstrous meaning in these events.

'She is untouched?' asked Ogo presently. 'No man has taken her?'

'It is so,' said Nigh and Hasta.

‘Therefore,’ affirmed Ogo tentatively, ‘she is pleasing to the earth-god.’

‘It is so,’ they answered.

‘If she had been taken by a man, this Wooma, the earth-god would see scorn in our sacrifice and be angry. Is it not?’

‘It is so,’ they murmured again.

Ogo leaped to his feet. ‘I, Ogo, have taken this woman. Lead me to my father Koor.’

CHAPTER 10

KOOR, WAKING FROM DREAMS, UTTERS THE DOOM OF OGO

So he came, driven at the spear's point, into the presence of Koor. Both Stare, who had brothered him, and Hawkon, who had once been his constant friend, were conspicuous among the warders, and their anger against him burned fiercely: Hawkon's because he was himself the proprietor of a woman, and Stare's because in his heart he had once cherished an unlawful desire. And all were at one in fearing that the curse of the gods might fall on the tribe before formal judgement had been pronounced and executed against the sinner. They entered Koor's court with ceremony, Hasta leading, Nigh following, and Hawkon commanding the prisoner's escort. The rumour of their doings filled the camp, and from the four points of the compass men came hurrying. Koor himself was almost the last to be roused, for nowadays sleep was his dearest indulgence: he loved nothing so much, once he had eaten his fill, as to lie dozing at his hearthside, with one or more of his women near, and a weapon gripped in his hand. Those who disturbed him on such occasions could count, all too confidently, on a rough welcome. Today he dreamed of love and

hunting : he was filled with the pride of youth, and well matched with the bright world. He held a writhing girl under one arm, and laughed at her struggles as he strolled jauntily through the forest in search of battle. A huge bull came thundering towards him. He dropped the girl, and she clung to his knees in terror. So with his naked hands he met the bull's assault, seized its horns and glared into its eyes. They stood rigid, man and bull ; the bull was strong, but the man was arrogant. The breath of the beast scorched Koor's face, but he laughed and glared the more fiercely ; felt the bull's strength entering his own body ; and at last knew himself victorious. The horns crumpled ; the great bulk sank in exhaustion under his pressure ; and the forest became full of shouting men, crying : Great is Koor ; mighty is Koor ; Koor is the great bull and the king of bulls, and we are his people. The old woman, ill-favoured and evil-smelling, who watched the sleeping chief, she who indeed had always watched him with unwearying devotion, and asked no thanks for it, she too remembered the young Koor, and it may be that she recognized him still in this snoring and wizened old body that slept with twitching limbs and gaping mouth. She was for ever telling him how great and wonderful he was, and in some fashion she believed it, though she believed, too, that his end was drawing near, and was tormented with fear for him. And now she must risk his displeasure and wake him ; for the noise of men was terrible and could bode no good.

She shook him ; he woke, snarling and frightened. 'Koor is the great bull,' he muttered. 'Yes, yes,' said the old woman soothingly. 'There's a noise of people coming. Get up, my brave lord, and face them.'

Hasta and Nigh bent their heads in reverence as the Old One rose ; but Hawkon stared boldly.

Koor uttered a bark of greeting.

'Greeting, O Koor our Father !' cried Hasta, in his shrill voice. 'Sin has been done in our midst. Woe and pestilence on them that suffer it !'

Koor, peering with dim eyes, motioned the Wise One nearer. 'Stand here, my son, within reach of me. What are these young men doing in my house ?'

'Sin has been done, O Father, and they have brought the sinner for judgement.'

Koor seemed not to understand. He was filled with feeble anger by this interruption of his peace ; and the display of power before him, the stalwart young men and the bristling spears, disconcerted him, so that for one instant he forgot that he, Koor, was greater and more terrible than them all.

'Sin,' he muttered testily. 'What sin is this ?'

Hasta crooked his finger at Nigh, who approached the Old One with gestures of fawning respect. Between them the two counsellors poured the dreadful story into Koor's ear. Ogo watched them with eyes that had never been so keen before, nor seen so much. What these men were saying he could not hear, for there was a strange tumult in

his brain. In his mortal parts he was appalled by the coil of disaster he had snared himself with ; but he remained steadfast in his resolve that Wooma, his woman, must not die at the hands of Hasta : rather, if needs be, at his own, since he was her lord and had taken her. Despite its roaring commotion his brain worked busily. But it worked in secret, without his conscious supervision : like a swarm of ants his thoughts ran this way and that, picked up seeming trifles, and stored them away. One thing went here, another there : the collection grew under his dreaming gaze ; but still he was unaware of the emerging pattern. Hawkon was a great hunter. Koor was old. Ogo's enemies were many, and he had no friend. It pleased him that, being so many, or for very eagerness to see him doomed, they had not spared time to bind him. Hasta and Nigh and the Old One were still in conference. Soon it would be his turn to speak ; and then—death. But he did not look so far ahead : he was content to stare at the moving lips of his accusers, and to listen idly to the patter of syllables in his mind.

When Hasta and Nigh, making much of little, at last came to an end of their story, Koor sat blinking fiercely. At last he rose to his feet and pointed a long withered finger at Ogo.

‘Speak,’ he commanded.

‘I have spoken,’ said Ogo, and he seemed to speak with a voice other and larger than his own. And the words that came seemed not of him ; for they had a strange authority, as though the gods

spoke them. 'The woman chosen for the sacrifice must not be given to the earth-god, or a pestilence will come upon us all. She is curst, for I have touched and taken her.'

'She is sib with him,' said Nigh.

'She is sib with him,' murmured the young men in chorus.

'Woe, woe, woe,' wailed Hasta, 'on them that suffer a sinner in their midst!'

'Kill him,' snapped Koor, 'and drive the woman into the wild. Kill him, but let no drop of his blood fall among us.'

'We will kill him,' agreed Hawkon coolly. His manner was insolent. He spoke as to an equal, if not to an inferior. For an idea had flashed into his mind, and to Hawkon an idea was an impulse. 'Listen, my Father. Listen, my brothers. Was this woman chosen by the gods?'

Koor looked at Hasta. 'Answer him, my son.'

'By the gods she was chosen,' faltered Hasta.

'Through the mouth of Hasta the Wise One, added Nigh quickly.

Hawkon's tone became uglier. 'Yet it was a bad choice and would have brought pestilence upon us. Were the gods, then, at fault? Or was Hasta the Wise One deceived?'

There was a murmur of admiration and anger from the young men behind him. Koor blinked stupidly. Hasta grinned with sudden terror, and turned in frenzy to the Tale-Bearer.

'It was Nigh,' he wailed, 'it was Nigh that deceived me.'

'It is not,' said Nigh. 'There is no fault in me. The fault is in Hasta.'

Hawkon stared challengingly at Koor, who still blinked and said nothing.

'We are waiting,' said Hawkon, 'for the judgement of Koor in this matter.'

Koor stood listening to a faraway sound, and gazing with dim eyes down a forest vista. He heard the thunder of the bull's hooves approaching, and he put out his hands and grinned fiercely. The great beast came plunging and roaring towards him. Then he saw that it was no bull after all, but a young man, an insolent young man.

'What are you called?' he demanded, facing Hawkon. 'What do they call you, my son?'

'They call me Hawkon,' said Hawkon proudly.

'Hawkon!' echoed his comrades.

The murmur rose to a shout, and the Old One smiled in triumph; for in his mind it was himself they were acclaiming, Koor the mighty one, the slayer of bulls. But in the midst of the clamour the sight of Hawkon pressed back into his eyes, and he grew angry. He remembered a grievance. He remembered Ogo and the tale of his sin. He scowled.

'Ha! You have spoken in scorn of the Wise One. You and the accurst shall die together.' He laughed. The speech pleased him. He was intoxicated with his fantasy and delighted in the

thought of this cub's death. 'You shall die, my son,' he repeated, with a titter.

For answer Hawkon lifted his spear. He knew now what he must do. He knew, but he did not even now know that this for many days had been the intention buried deep in his heart. In one instant of time the seed of his ambition burst, thrust through the darkness, budded and flamed into a bright terrible flower. Its beauty enchanted him and he had eyes for nothing else. Koor was old and feeble and ugly: Koor must give place to his conqueror. Nor did he know—such flights were far beyond him—that even as Koor was now, so he Hawkon would one day be.

The spear of Hawkon pierced his father's throat. The figures in Koor's fantasy loomed for the last time in the dying brain. The bull charged, and was caught by its horns. It snorted fire on its captor. I am the great bull and the king of bulls, thought Koor . . .

Hawkon retrieved his spear and held it high.

'I am the Koor,' he cried.

'You are the Koor, great Hawkon,' quavered Nigh, shrinking away from sight of his dying master.

'The gods have spoken again,' wailed Hasta. 'They tell me that Hawkon is the Koor.'

But the young men were in a frenzy, Hawkon having the only cool head amongst them. All their long suppressed hatred of these elders found vent in violence. The stroke of an axe silenced Hasta's

wailing, and a dozen spears leaped to transfix the Tale-Bearer. Hawkon's voice quelled the riot, and all drew back in fear from their work. And no one noticed that Ogo was no longer in their midst; no one had seen him—in the very moment of Koor's death—slip through into the inner room, the sacred secret place where the women sat shuddering together. If to Hawkon this killing of the Old One was triumph, to Ogo it was deliverance. And the screaming of the women at sight of him gave him no check. 'The Old One is slain,' he said, 'and Hawkon is the Koor.' He spoke to distract their attention from himself; and his eyes searched among them. He sought and found Wooma. A little apart from the others (for was she not dedicated to death?), she lay in a languid trance. She, like himself, was unfettered: being young and desirable, she could be safely entrusted to the custody of her fellow-women. 'Come!' he said. The women, disregarding him, were crowded at the moot door. 'Come, Wooma. Here's Ogo.' She stared, screamed, jumped to her feet. But Ogo did not wait to look at her again: he was scratching and tearing, like a dog, at a small aperture in the wall. Some of the women, eager to fawn at the feet of their new lord, were filtering through into the death-chamber; and the others, staring in frightened wonder at the intruder Ogo, could do nothing to thwart his impious design. He was strong, and he was sib to them: they dared not touch him.

In the hall of doom Hawkon raised his spear again, commanding silence. And when all voices had ceased, he fell on his knees at the feet of the three corpses. 'O Koor, I have slain you, but I am your friend henceforth. In life you were mighty, and we your sons will praise you wherever we go. Visit us not in anger, O Old One, but go far from this place, or stay where we leave you. And you, Hasta, and you, Nigh, remember us kindly, and do us no harm, for we are your friends too. You three, you mighty ones, shall have this house to live in for ever.' He rose and turned to his brothers. 'We will pile great stones upon them. We will fill this place with great stones, and close it up with the greatest of all, so that their demons will be comfortable and not trouble us.'

The young men ran to do his bidding. Stare alone lingered.

'O Koor, O Hawkon,' said Stare, with profound respect, 'what of Ogo and the woman who have sinned together, being sib?'

The wailing of the women was no longer to be ignored. They wailed not for the death of the Old One, but because Ogo had broken into their sanctuary and snatched Wooma from them, where she lay awaiting the time of sacrifice. Sin had gone unpunished; the vengeance of the gods must fall on all the sons and daughters of Koor. . . . And so in after days, though the tribe flourished with Hawkon at its head, every misfortune that visited them was laid to Ogo's account; many conflicting

tales were told of how the sinners, perishing in the wild, were pursued for ever by the curse of their sin; and the suffering voices of Ogo and Wooma were heard in every wailing wind. The sinners themselves, in their squat by the distant river, knew nothing of these tales and heard no such voices. Strangely forgetful of the past they lived to a ripe age, and their sons made many boats.

THE SECOND ARC

CHAPTER 1

COMPANY AT THE NICK OF TIME, WITH ELOQUENCE
IN SPATE AND MUCH TALK OF A HANGING

ON a cool crisp evening in January, in the year seventeen hundred and fifty, the High Street of Marden Fee presents to us the appearance of a vivid dream. It is a broad street for so small a place: broad and brief, branching at its west end into three smaller roads whose junction forms two obtuse angles, and at the east end dwindling to a lane that winds unobtrusively past the parish church. The church, with its surrounding acre of tombs, stands on an eminence that was formerly cultivated ground and the scene of human sacrifice. It dominates the High Street, and is confronted at the other end by an inn, The Nick of Time, which stands, square and squat and comfortable, between two prongs of the fork, with the road to Glatting going north to the right of it, and two smaller roads, the one to Dyking Manor and the other to Medlock, running south-east and south-west. To a careless eye, as to a fanciful mind, these two buildings, the church and the tavern, close the street up, so that it looks like an island of habitation in a sea of field and forest. Some fourteen furlongs behind the church, and beyond our sight at the moment, stands the residence of young Squire Marden, whose grand-

father was the first lord of this fee, a slice then newly carved from the parish of Glatting. The High Street is deserted. It seems to float, without motion, in a clear white silence. The smoke curling from its chimneys oozes slowly upwards and is gently teased into wisps and tatters by the wind ; and the hanging tavern-sign sends a long black banner streaming across the moonwashed wall. All the houses are in darkness, except the inn itself, whose parlour window, the life and heart of the scene, attracts the eye with a glowing square of red. Hovering we watch, surveying the whole ; and presently can dimly discern something moving, with aged precision, in the shadow of Church Lane. Stepping at last into the brightness of the street, it is seen to be the figure of an old man, small and bent. The sound of his boots on the hard road breaks sharply into the surrounding silence ; echo gives it back and sends it radiating in spirals to the sky. His walk is confident if slow. Without lifting his eyes from the ground he moves forward unfalteringly, as though drawn by the warmth of the red window. Nor does he for more than a moment pause at the inn door. His hand finds the latch. As the door opens, there escapes into the street, like heat from an oven, a warm gust of human sound. Then the door is slammed to, and the night is still, and the sounds that lately invaded it are become a memory.

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Laughter greeted the old man's entry, a laughter composed of many elements. Dick Mykelborne the wheelwright's was genial, even admiring. Dick was a hearty and a godly fellow, big and black-bearded and nearing fifty. Like most other men of his age who wished themselves younger, he derived an unconscious comfort from the existence of this ancient man, took pleasure in his company, and respected him for having dodged death so long. The old man's weakness made him feel his own strength, and the old man's longevity made him feel immortal, for he was of a sanguine temperament and had that spirit in him that can read all signs in the sky as signs of fair weather. He sat near the fire, in the corner of the high-backed settle, and his large hand clasped lovingly a pint pot. His neighbour Tom Shellett, a lean stringy young fellow with eyes as placid as the cows he herded, laughed for no better reason than that the others laughed; Broome, the young master of twelve scattered acres, sounded a derisive note, being still insolent with youth; Gipsy Noke gave a shy hesitating grin, for he was conscious, as a borderer but newly settled, of his inferior status (moreover, the old man was gardener at the Vicarage and in that capacity had once rebuked him); and Roger Peakod, having drowned his small wit in ale, could only giggle and stare. The potman stared without giggling, and remained so, like a fool, till his master came close and spake a sharp word in his ear. This Erasmus Bailey, the innkeeper, was the only one who at this moment had attention for

the company as well as for the old man from Squire's. A comparative stranger among them, for he had been in the village but twenty years, he had the reputation of being something of a scholar, and a cut above the general run of men. Rumour called him a runaway schoolmaster. This gave him authority, without—for he was a genial fellow enough—making him the less liked by his humble patrons. If he smiled now at the comedy staged in his inn parlour, it was rather with wonder than with mirth, for a half-fledged thought fluttered in his head that if, instead of this aged man, a small precocious child had entered the inn parlour, the attitude of these fellows to their visitor could hardly have been much different; and a couplet—for he had the knack of such things—began shaping in his mind:

*From Infancy to Age is but a span,
And Age reveals the Infant in the Man.*

But he kept his sententiousness to himself. The thought was timely, but not timely to be spoken. He gave greeting to the newcomer.

'Good evening to you, Mr Timms. Your servant, friend.'

'Come you in, Coachy,' cried Dick Mykelborne.
'Come in and warm yourself, old gennelman.'

Coachy Timms, having shut the door behind him, stood with his bent back against it and peered at the company with his small cornflower-blue eyes.

He had somewhat the look of an ancient and benign elf, being spare of body, with thin legs and small feet, and a head larger than the rest of him seemed to warrant. This suggestion of top-heaviness gave to his every movement an air of singular adroitness, as though he were a tight-rope walker. You half expected to see him lose his balance, and the wonder of him was that he encouraged this expectation while never satisfying it. He had a neatness, a grace of movement. His face was round and rosy, having the hard glossiness, as well as the colour, of a certain kind of ripe apple; and a nimbus of white beard, still stained with its original yellow, encircled this face without concealing its contours. The upper lip was clean-shaven; the cheeks were polished and hairless; the eyebrows made a thin high arch above the candid eyes. A tall hat hid the baldness of his crown, and set off to advantage the fringe of grey curls that remained to him. Withal his nose was thin, like the beak of a bird; thin and small and straight, the nostrils delicately curved and mettlesome with humour.

Coachy Timms regarded the company with twinkling irony. 'God-a-mercy, neighbours. 'Tis a laamentable bright fresh night,' he said. And the men round the fire began nudging each other, seeing in this simple remark far more than the words would have seemed to warrant. For that was the effect of Coachy Timms. He moved to the fire and was plied with drink. 'A bright fresh night,' he repeated, after a pause, smiling to feel the warmth

of the liquor tingling through his body. 'There be frost in ut, and a round moon, and stars a-plenty. As pretty a mixture as Goddle Mighty ever made. I'll wager a clapped his hands and called his mother when a'd finished.'

'Have a care, friend,' said the innkeeper. 'That smells to me of popery.'

'Then thy nose be longer than thy years, Mus Bailey,' retorted Coachy. He took a long swig from his glass. 'But that's all one. 'Twas a manner of speaking. As for popery, I'm no pope's man, nor never was. But there be some we knows on that is, and haply what be good enough for Squire Marden be good enough for poor folk.'

His audience did not quite know what to make of this oracular utterance. They were baffled and silenced: no new experience for them. To the soberest among them, Mykelborne and Bailey, it sounded mighty like sedition; and they wondered what King George would have had to say about it had he been present. But Coachy Timms, when his tongue ran away with him, was notoriously a wilful and harmless old party: with which reflection the innkeeper quickly recovered his good humour. 'Have a care you don't let Parson hear you talk that way,' said he, indulgently.

'Parson?' echoed Coachy. He gazed into his glass and shook his head solemnly, as if to say he could see no parson there. 'There be parsons and there be parsons. 'Tis like harses. There be big and liddle, tempersome and quiet. There be them

do goo camsteery at sound of a hedge-sparry, and them that will pick their road as choice as you please through a black starm, wi' thunderbolts dancen like fleas in a hen-cup. There be all sarts and all manners; likewise all colours and kinds. Some do need the whip to make 'em trot, and others'll race for a chirrup. Some goo gansing-gay if you give 'em rein a-plenty and ask no questions, but they won't be druv. Try and putt they in double harness, and ups 'em goo on their hind legs like a preachen Methody. Yet others'll run so sweet in pair as a brace of young ladies gwain to charch in their best bonnets. So you may take ut from Coachy Timms: there be harses and harses.'

'And I'll tell *you* something, old gennelman.' Young Broome pushed his face forward with an air of great cleverness. 'I'll tell you something about harses.'

Coachy raised his eyes and glanced at the speaker in a way that would have silenced a more sensitive man. 'I'm young yet, Master Broome. I'll haply learn if you'll pudder wi' me.'

Broome struggled to ignore the laughter he had brought upon his head. 'Yes, I know a thing or two, gaffer. There be stolen harses, tellee, besides this kind and that kind. There be stolen harses.' He looked round in triumph.

'Ay, tis true,' said several of the company, nodding to each other. 'Tis true enough.'

Coachy Timms rose slowly from his seat and turned frostily to the innkeeper. 'What's this?' he asked.

His host begged him to be seated again. 'There's no offence, neighbour. No offence in the world, I'm sure. 'Twas for stealing a horse they hanged yon fellow from Glatting today. Farmer Broome here was telling us but now how he fared on the gallows.'

Broome eagerly took up the tale. 'Ay, a villainous fellow a was. A countable ugly face on him, a had.'

'Ah!' said the company, greatly relishing the story. 'Countable ugly, was he?' said one. 'A savage customer, I bluv,' said another. The rest, impatient for a repetition of details they had already heard, said nothing, but stared expectantly at the enterprising Broome, who had travelled many miles and missed a day's work to see this execution and was now come home with a rich treasure of memory.

With a selfconscious swagger Broome called to the potman for another pint. All eyes, except Coachy's, were upon him. 'He'll steal no more harses, sartain sure.' He laughed cockily, as though to himself belonged the credit of this achievement. And his neighbours, seeming to concede this point of view, took up the laugh with admiration.

'So they hanged the villain, did 'em?' said Roger Peakod invitingly.

'You're right, Roger,' said Broome, with a lordly smile. 'Hang un they did, I bluv. And with these two eyes I seen 'em.'

'Sarve un fair for a thief,' grumbled Mykelborne, with, nevertheless, a troubled look in his eyes.

'Hangen, mark my words,' said Shellett the cowherd, 'be too good for some of they poxy knaves. Arnest folk same as us baint safe in our beds o' night with they abroad.' His placid eyes grew bright with fear.

'Yet tis a shameful thing, all said,' ventured Mr Bailey, 'to send a man to his Maker with a noose round his neck.'

'And how did a look?' asked Peakod urgently. 'Did a goo black i' the face, farmer?'

'A did so,' said Broome. 'But that worn't the best on it. Now twas this way, neighbours . . .'

'And another thing I've larned from harses,' resumed Coachy Timms, in his clear, penetrating, high-pitched voice, 'is to mind me manners and talk to 'em as man to man. All sarts and kinds and colours I've had dealens with . . .'

'Chained up like a mad dog, you might say,' said Broome. 'And when they dragged un outa gaol, twoulda done you good, neighbours, to hear the brave clamour he do make . . .'

' . . . blacks and whites and roans and chestnuts,' went on Coachy relentlessly, 'young and old and good and bad and ornary middlin sinners like you and me. I've seen 'em gotten, I've seen 'em born, I've broke 'em in, I've ridden and druv 'em. I've handled more harses than I've seen stars in the sky. But I'm willen to learn the head and tail of the business from any son of Smulkin as'll be painful to teach me.'

'Such a clamour as you never did, neighbours,'

said Broome. 'Then up a goo on the cart, and away goo the cart to where gallows was waiting all spruce and ready. And here's a fine new cravat for thee, says Jack Ketch, putten the noose on him. Then Parson brung out his book and we gives over shouten and doffs our hats like Christian men, and Master Thief do stand there all trussed up like a fowl and staren and listenen . . .'

'A good drop of ale!' cried Coachy, emerging from his glass. 'And what's more,' he added, taking up the thread of his discourse, 'harses is cunnen cattle. A deal more human than some folks on two legs, and a deal better worth looken at. If there be a prettier sight than a smart young foal balancing hisself on his long spindlies and nuzzlen his dam, tis not in this alehouse I do see ut. When I was a younger man . . .'

He paused to take another draught of ale.

'Bind up the wretch's eyes, cries Parson, dropping his book of a sudden. He be putten a curse on me, God shield us!' Broome's voice had become so strident as to command attention even from Coachy for a moment. There fell a sudden silence, in which his startled audience seemed to be hearing, in the quiet of the mind, more than Broome had told them, more indeed than he had witnessed. This silence puzzled and discomforted him: he was all for merriment. But the prime of the joke was yet to come. 'And so, neighbours, when Parson do say that, we all stare at the prisoner, us and Jack Ketch and all. And the prisoner, he stares over our heads,

you might say, at the sky, and looked as though he didn't know we was there, not a mother's son of us. But butter my wig if a wasn't snivvellen on the sly. Tears in his eyes as big as gobs.' The narrator burst into a loud guffaw; and Peakod, his most appreciative listener, responded with his customary giggle.

'When I was a younger man,' said Coachy, 'my dad had a mare we called Brown Bess, which was named after the Queen of England herself. But she's dead, I've heard, and there be a king now, bainta? Charles or James or William, or is it George, neighbours? That's as may be. I've seen a lot come and goo, and it never made no manner of difference to the harses. Now this Bess, I'm spoken of the mare, markee, we had her sarved by Farmer Brisket's Standish the First, and a fine upstanden stallion he was, and never known to fail. Nor a didn't this time nuther, for a laamentable pretty foal he got on Bess, and I was there seeing him come into the warld. Tis in the end of a soft night he do come, and he come wropt round in a blanket of stars. Or a cloud haply. Tis all one: he were wet and steamen, and that's the sense of ut. And now you're here, I said, what might you make of ut, my coney? Pretty middlin, says he, blinken with his oily eyes. Oily and brown they was with a fleck of purple in 'em. Pretty middlin, says he, but wait till I've the use of my legs. And that were fair enough, so I come back to un at daybreak: And how now, my dear? Not so homelike, he says,

but ut had to be, and once I get used to this dazzle o' sunshine and bright grass I daun't doubt but I'll settle down snug. As for you, he says, bringen his hither eye close to mine, so that twas like staren into Glatting Mere on a dark quiet night, you look a likely lad, says he, and if you treat me right I'll treat you right, and that's a bargain. But if you or your dad are thinken to call me Standish the Second, or any such rubbidge as that, he says, you can just put it outa mind, and lively. For I'm Lubin, that's my name, and Lubin I'll be, says Lubin. And with that he frisked around and nuzzled up to his dam. I'll allow, neighbours, that I took a fancy to that young foal from the first I set eyes on him; for I'd never knowed a piece of harse-flesh look so spry and talk so plain.'

'I dunno what your way of thinken may be, Mus Mykelborne,' said Broome, 'nor yours, Mus Bailey, nor yours, Tahm Shellett. But to my mind a thief's a thief and desarnes no better.'

'Ay, tis a lesson for us all,' returned Mykelborne piously. 'A youngish fellow, I'll 'low. Thirty summers, no more. Cut off in his pinky prime, as Postle Paul do say. And them that saw 'un die'll have the fear of God in their hearts for evermore.'

'Thirty summers is a lot to lose,' said Mr Bailey, and quoting from his own unpublished works he declaimed with some pomp:

*'Behold the skylark, in the vernal morn,
A feather'd songster, rising from the corn!'*

Broome led the applause. 'Well done, sir!' said he. 'Ay, larks is good eating, there's no doubt. But the law's the law, and them that saw what I seen today will think twice, I'll 'low, afore they fall into scaddle ways like him. Come, landlord, I'll pay scot, and you'll oblige me, neighbours, by taken a round of liquor with Nat Broome. You too, old friend,' he added, leaning towards Coachy Timms, to whose eyes he appeared to be invisible, and to whose ears inaudible. 'You too, Coachman Timms, so we be all dutch cousins together.' Lacking a response from Coachy, he shrugged his shoulders, winking at the company, and thrust his hand deep into an inner pocket. His fingers searched for a moment; the grin faded slowly from his face. He tried another pocket; scowled; gaped; and stood staring at the sanded floor with mouth open, unable to believe what his questing fingers told him.

All but Coachy were staring at him, and all who stared seemed to share his concern with guileless heart except one. The one exception was the dark slim tall fellow they called Gipsy Noke, a man neither old nor very young but of uncertain age, black-haired, black-browed, sallow-complexioned, but English enough, and of Sussex, though his speech had an alien tang in it. He was a squatter who had come, heaven knew whence, and planted himself on a bit of waste land just within the parish border, armed with a shy geniality, money in his pocket with which to satisfy the parish officer in case of need, sense enough to lie low and provoke few questions,

and energy enough to begin at daybreak building himself a shack and have smoke curling from its chimney before sundown, so surviving the traditional test in these parts of a newcomer's title to toleration and peaceful settlement. Till now he had watched and listened and taken his drink in silence.

'Lost summat, Nat Broome?' asked Gipsy Noke.

There was a brightness in the man's eyes and a smile in his tone that meant mischief, but Broome was already too far gone in fury to notice anything amiss.

'My purse of money,' he stammered. 'I had ut safe in this pocket here, and now tis garn.' His mouth filled with oaths, and they trickled out in a muddy stream. 'Five silver shillens there was, as I'm a martal man.'

'Ah,' said Gipsy Noke, with a sly look at the rest of the company, 'I'll 'low there be a tidy lot of rogues will goo see a fellow creatur hanged.' The folk of Marden Fee were for ever 'allowing' this or that; but their 'I'll 'low' heralded no mere concession or admission, but something between a strong opinion and a confident conjecture. Gipsy, with his talent for popularity, had been quick to see the wisdom of acquiring the local turns of speech. 'How it do strike me, Nat, is this way,' he continued, answering Broome's angry stare. 'You was watchen un kick and choke, and tellen yourself what a fine lesson twas for them others as seen ut. This'll larn un, says you, to steal harses. Ha, ha, he daun't like that sart of caper, I'll 'low, you says.

And these good folks'll think twice afore they fall into scaddle ways same as him, says you.' Gipsy Noke spat on the floor and gazed at his work pensively. 'Seems to me some furrin file musta thought twice about picken your poke, farmer. And liked the jape so well that he took and played ut.'

'Five silver shillens,' cried Broome. 'Five silver shillens, neighbours! If I had un here,' he went on, larding his speech with bitches and bastards, 'if I had un here that took that purse of mine, I'd spile his face for un . . .' Having briefly outlined his plan of vengeance, he began to remember, or think he remembered, that someone had jostled him at the very moment when they took the cart away and left the horse-thief hanging. 'A liddle dirty foxy fellow there was at side of me, and when I turned round there worn't a shim of him to see, and I thought no more on ut. A little foxy son of a . . .'

'Lubin were a good lad,' said Coachy Timms, in a voice that rang shrill and resonant as a bugle and gathered volume with every word. He paused. There was silence. 'Lubin,' he repeated mildly, 'were a good lad and a lad of sperrit. He was fond of his paddock, and fond of his dam, and took his nurridgement hearty. To see them together, him and Brown Bess, twas a sight to see. Five hands you may say, and her tall as a house and broad in the belly as a schooner. He'd trot by her side round the madda as nice and neat as you could wish, keepen his head turned t'ards her, but with a big

shy brown eyeball well cocked and open to t'other side and not missen much as went on. Yes, a lad of sperrit, and us had many a talk together after that first talk.'

Coachy paused to lift the pot to his lips, and the landlord took this chance of remarking that Jim Dander was on the road again, as he had heard, and there, said he, was a man for you that better deserved hanging than any mere horse-thief, for twas a pity if honest folk must travel armed at all points like a soldier, on pain of being held up and robbed and left in a ditch by the roadside. 'A very notable scoundrel indeed,' concluded the landlord, shaking his grave head. 'Tis not ten days since he murdered the turnpike-keeper down Ludworth way, and passed himself off as the corpse, as you might put it, when the gentry came driving by.'

'Ay,' said Mykelborne.

'Ay,' echoed Shellett.

'True enough,' said Gipsy Noke.

'I'd like to see him tumblen *me* into a ditch,' cried Broome, with a braggart air.

'So would I, Nat,' said Gipsy Noke.

'So would ee what?' demanded Broome.

'Like to see Jim Dander tumblen you into a ditch,' said Gipsy Noke. 'Twould be a rare sight.'

'Come, neighbours, no belvering in my parlour,' said Mr Bailey, laying a swift hand on Broome's arm. 'There's the street outside, Nat Broome, for those that can't take a handful of chaff without spitting dirt.'

The silence that followed was a silence big with dramatic possibilities. It was broken by the voice of Coachy Timms blandly resuming his tale. 'He'd a mind of his own, that liddle colt, and a was a dential feeder. But I soon had him in trim shape, and no ill feelen atwixt us.'

'What, going, Nat!' said Mr Bailey pleasantly. 'Good night to you, I'm sure.'

The door shut with a slam.

'And that's why I say,' said Coachy Timms, 'that there be parsons and parsons, just as there be harses and harses. And the same hand made 'em all didn't a? And he's his good days and his bad days same as any other journeyman. A quick worker too, as I telled Parson Croup. Seven days is no great time for to make a warld in. I hope, says Parson, you're of the true faith, Coachy. Squire's a good squire, says he, but dauntie be led into papistry, friend. There's a tidy shatter of sin already in the Fee, says Parson. Ah, says I, but us can't all be saints like yourself, Parson. Goddle Mighty took time and trouble over you. But us ornary folk, us be made out of the shavens left over. What kind of talk be this? cries Parson in a pet. Is this the way to speak of the Deity? And why not, Reverence? Ancient of Days they do call him, but he be not a day older than the first day, nor never will be, to my thinken. He be a lad still, and he made ut all in play, sun moon and stars a-plenty, like a five-year-old blowen soap-bubbles on washen-day. Look at 'em all a-shimper, says he.

Look at 'em floaten in the sky, mother! And he clapped he's hands and saw that ut was good, same as the Book do say.'

'That's queer doctrine indeed,' said Mr Bailey. 'That's a doctrine I've never encountered in my reading. What said Parson to it?'

'As to that, I dun naw,' answered Coachy. 'For I din understand a word. But why,' he added, complainingly, 'why daun't young Gipsy putt us in heart wi' a song or two?'

Everyone welcomed the suggestion; and Noke, stepping forward, fixed his gaze on the floor, and coughed once or twice, and stroked his throat nervously.

'Well, what shall ut be, neighbours?'

'*All in a Misty Morning*,' suggested Mr Bailey. 'That's a tuneful piece.'

'Nay,' said Tom Shellett, 'give us *Two Bumpkins Loved a Lass*. That be tarrible lacherous,' he added, with solemn joy.

'The one I do know best,' said Noke, bashfully, 'be *Tibb of Tottingham*. But haply you've had he too often, neighbours?'

They all applauded his choice, and the singer, as if communing with himself, tried over his tune in a kind of whisper. Then after a few tentative false starts, he found the right pitch and began, in a full baritone :

*As I came from Tottingham
Upon a market-day,
There I met a bonny lass*

*Clothed all in gray.
Her journey was to London
With buttermilk and whey,
To come down a-down,
To come down, down-a down-a.*

*And as we rode together
Along side by side,
The maiden it so chanced
Her garter was untied.
For fear that she should lose it,
Look here, sweetheart, I cried,
Your garter is down a down,
Tis down, down-a down-a.*

*Good sir, quoth she,
I pray you take the pain
To do so much for me
As to take it up again.
With a good will, quoth I,
When I come to yonder plain
I'll take you down a-down,
Take you down, down-a down-a.*

The applause was hearty. The singer's face became creased with smiles. They cried him encore, and he stood with his eyes on the ceiling, waiting for the din to subside. Some ten yards below the soles of his boots lay the bones of Koor and Hasta and Nigh, untouched since their slaying; and in the veins of every man of this company, of this village,

and of this country, ran the blood of Koor. From the great Pitt to the oafish Roger Peakod, they all had this ancestor in common.

‘Let’s have another,’ cried Coachy. ‘Give it rein, my coney.’

‘There be fi’ more varses,’ said Gipsy Noke, half diffident, half triumphant.

‘Let’s have ’em,’ said they all.

The singer opened and shut his mouth without sound, as though to make sure that his jaws were in working order. Then he opened it again: this time to sing:

*Thus Tibb of Tottingham
She lost her maidenhead,
But yet it is no matter,
It stood her in small stead——*

But at that moment there came a sharp and peremptory tapping on the tavern door, and everybody turned in his seat to stare.

CHAPTER 2

IN WHICH FATHER GANDY BECOMES BROTHER RAPHE

IN the dining-room at Maiden Holt, Jack Marden, the young lord of the Fee, sat alone at dessert. In accordance with his fancy, all traces of the evening meal had been cleared from the table, whose dark shining surface was patterned, now, only by silver bowls of fruit, a dish of nuts, coloured decanters, wine glasses, and certain pieces of fragile china acquired in an earlier century by his great-grandfather. A man not yet thirty, he sat surrounded by the small and faded remains of a substantial though never great inheritance. Beyond his private demesne was the Fee itself, comprising a numerous tenantry ; commons in which he held certain manorial rights ; and farmlands, of which one George Hayward was an arrogant and none too efficient bailey. Within that circle, and the dearer to his heart, was Maiden Holt Park, with its hundred or more head of red deer, its carp pond, its dovecote, its dells and spinneys. And within that again was a circle of tall pines surrounding house and garden. The room he sat in was long and low-ceiled : a room friendly and full of an enduring past. Its windows were close-shuttered and curtained in heavy damask. The fire was lively in its large hearth. The seven

candles of the candelabra poured pools of light on the table as upon a dark lake, and set small shadows moving on the walls; and, sometimes, one or another of them would sputter and send a thin curl of smoke rising from a lank wick. The young man sat lost in a trance of thoughtfulness, neither eating nor drinking. His gaze, but not his thought, was held by the circle of candlelight that edged with a ring as of fire the brim of his glass.

In this mood he looks so boyish that we find it hard to believe what in fact we know: that so much as five years earlier, when in his first twenties, he had been accounted a likely source of danger to the state, and so had received, from his father's old acquaintance, Mr. Root, the Glatting magistrate, a demand that all the arms at Maiden Holt should at once be given up. With the official order came a very civil letter, a word in season, to the effect that my Lord Vernon, with two ninety-gun ships, was gone to the Downs. 'I am sure Mr. Marden needs no reminding,' added Mr. Root, being evidently sure of no such thing, 'that as well his loyalty to King George, as the safety of his own person, requires that he act in these troubled times with all candour and discretion.' With the Pretender occupying Carlisle, and panic hurrying hotfoot on its devious ways, Mr Root did no more than his duty, and did it, we must allow, with a certain grace. For his pains he became the temporary guardian of three bullet guns, two carabines, four shot guns, and a dozen pairs of plain screw-barrelled pistols: the which he promised to restore

to their owner with a thousand times the satisfaction he had had in receiving them. The folk of Marden Fee were more nervous than Mr Root, and in the same degree less polite. Raphe Gandy, the resident priest of Maiden Holt, was hissed down the High Street and arrived home spattered with Protestant mud ; and Paul Dewdney, as innocent of Jacobitism as any of them, had his head broken to the glory of King George. But, the danger past, the people repented, and good feeling between themselves and the Maiden Holt household was, by the measure of that repentance, not only restored but increased. The persuasion gained ground that the Jacobites had lost their last throw, and that papists, in consequence, could henceforward be regarded as no worse than queer. If these humble politicians could have read the mind of their young squire they would have found their new trust in him more than justified.

Jack Marden was a Catholic by force of tradition and habit, and he remained so, against his worldly interest, because he was too loyal to old memories, too stubbornly independent, to desert an unpopular cause, or (which is nearer the truth of his case) repudiate an unpopular label, no matter how little it meant to him. He had inherited his religion with the family plate and he was proud of it, as of all his possessions ; but he was an Englishman first, a landed squire, with a deep dumb feeling for his home horizons, a sense of immediate duties, and a feudal bond with his servants and tenants, whom he had no wish to leave, and to neglect, in the pursuit of

romantic foolishness. And, since a man's heart will take sides with or without the authority of his considered judgement, he in fact resented Jacobitism and all its works. He was for leaving well alone, in the comfortable expectation of its becoming better—as apparently was its habit, for this new German king stood higher in general favour than ever his predecessor had done. The house of Stuart meant as much to Jack Marden, and as little, as the sentimental songs of one's boyhood ; as a child he had beglamoured it with heroic daydreams, but, so soon as he began to look on the world with a man's eyes, whatever there was of poetry in him took another turn. The reign of God's anointed had ended before his birth : it was a remote thing, a fairy tale, which he regarded with a rather perfunctory reverence that concealed from others, but not always from himself, a certain impatience of the political fervour that the royal name still had power to inspire in many breasts. Nor had the pervasive influence of Father Gandy, his priest and tutor and friend, tended to make an active Jacobite of him : rather it may be that it was the priest himself who, against all natural expectation, had guided him insensibly into the path of acquiescence. For Father Gandy, though neither renegade nor heretic, and though prompt in the performance of his priestly duties, cared more, it would seem, for religion than for the church that embodied it. He was lazy, virtuous, and wise ; he was comfort-loving, and saintly ; and if there are contradictions here, it is life

that made the ravel, not we who but observe, that must resolve them.

If Jack Marden, staring at the bright brim of his wine glass, recalled for a brief instant the events and hazards of 'forty-five, it was Paul Dewdney that had prompted the recall : his manservant Paul Dewdney, who at this moment lay upstairs a-dying. Thinking of him, Squire Marden felt as he looked—a boy, and forlorn. Forlorn, and none the less so when the anger of feeling himself powerless to help the man made his mouth move and his nostrils dilate. At such times his eyes blazed, and he wanted to do murder upon the phantom that was destroying Paul. There was now but small hope of the fellow's recovery. The little that human wit could devise had been done : the Glatting apothecary was with him now, and a great man from the remote royal village of Kensington in Middlesex had but recently left the house. Father Gandy, whose wine stood untasted, whose napkin lay in the chair where he had let it fall but five minutes ago, was at the bedside. Death is arrogant and graceless, a disturber of the peace. He affronts our dignity, interrupts us at supper, ignores our arguments, insults us with his peremptory airs. Nor does he disdain to take us at a disadvantage. He is without scruple or discrimination, and therefore is no gentleman. Marden was indignant with such manners and sore at heart ; for he was losing something more than a servant and something more than a friend : one who had companioned him in boyhood, and in spite of their

different stations had played the elder brother to him, reaching him to ride and fight and fish and shoot, and how to snare and skin a rabbit, and the nice points in cockfighting. That active comradeship was past these many years ; but though the relationship had changed outwardly, keeping pace with the years, the old bond of affection had never been broken. Many memories pressed upward for release into his mind, where at present there was room only for anger and anxiety.

And now the door opened and the seven candle-flames bowed to their young master. The man who stood in the doorway, and paused for a moment before entering further, was dressed so soberly, and looked so shy, that you might at first glance have taken him for a servant or a poor relation but that there was something in his eyes betokening authority as well as the habitual kindness that is the visible part of wisdom. He was a smallish man with a round face, a broad nose, and a mouth slightly out of true ; bald of crown, but with graying brown hair still copious about the temples ; and plump of figure, as befits a man who enjoys a quiet mind and good living. As he stepped forward into the room he shifted his keen gaze from Marden, and, with head a little aslant, seemed to look down the side of his nose at the carpet, as if he saw there the answer to his questing thought. He moved to his chair and laid a hand on the back of it. It was a hand full of character, expressing something, of austerity and spiritual power, that the jolly contours of the face tended to disguise.

‘Well?’ asked Marden, breaking the silence between them.

The priest bowed his head. ‘Our friend is with God.’

‘No!’ The young man had expected this event, but now he must needs deny it. He rose, shading his eyes from the sight of his companion, and moved slowly towards the hearth, where there was warmth, fire, a beacon still unquenched. But in an instant he turned angrily. ‘Why didn’t you call me, sir? It is a day since I saw him.’

‘It was not his wish,’ said the priest. He smiled: not amusedly, but as one smiles in the presence of troubling beauty. ‘Nor did we know he was so near his end. He received the sacrament and died at peace. He said he was sorry to have caused such a parcel of commotion; he thanked us for our pains; and he wished, he said, that it might not prove a trouble to Master Jack.’

Jack Marden looked; then looked away. ‘Not for ten years has he called me that.’

Staring again into the red caverns and hills of the fire, he was away with the memories that now came crowding to him. He was nine years old, the only child of a fond mother. Fond, but tempering her fondness with a certain rough-and-tumble discipline. She corrected his manners when they were at fault; she expected obedience to her few commands, and got it without having recourse to his father, an expedient that would have been a betrayal of their comradeship, a breach of the deep and happy

and unsentimental understanding between them ; she demanded of him—in a ceremonious age—less ceremony in his commerce with herself than would have been considered the due of an elder sister ; she was dogmatic, quick-tempered, generous, shrewd, loving ; pretending to no more patience and forbearance than she possessed, and capable of playing with a small boy as with an equal. In all this she was but herself, spontaneous and unreflecting ; for though she had many moments of thoughtfulness and self-questioning, and in secret pondered much upon her son's unknown destiny, the last thing she would have dreamt of giving conscious attention to was her personal relation with him : that she took for granted, happily and easily, never doubting of success, as young lovers, being sure of each other, take their first kiss. The result was all that a mother could wish. By an instinct of genius that knew no art, nor needed any, she made herself the seal upon his multifarious happiness, his inexhaustible zest in the newness and colour and infinite humorous surprises of mortal life ; so that however far he wandered in the rage of his infant curiosity, whatever fun he encountered or games invented or new play-mates found, it was always to his mother that he brought back the tale of his day's work, and the prospect of so sharing his experiences provided a delicate undertone in all he did and suffered. She was sometimes hasty in rebuke, but her anger came and went in swift flashes, fire from the flint of kindness : her very violence was friendly, presupposing

intimacy and love ; for with an offending stranger, even with a child if she could not love it, she would have been cool, dignified, careful to hide herself. From Jack she hid nothing, except her opinion (which we shall never know) of his father : a man much her senior who spent the greater part of his time in London, consorting with fashionable rakes and loud-laughing women, and industriously wasting his inheritance at cards and cockfights and other diversions of the town. With it all he was curiously reserved—‘the proudest gull that ever invited fleecing,’ they said who had best reason to know. A big morose man, with a vast face pitted with the small pox, and eyes in which one might perhaps have read that he was never at peace with himself, for nine days out of ten he would take no notice of his son, and on the tenth, unbending and becoming aggressively playful, would wax coarsely sarcastic, or sulkily self-pitying, at receiving a timid response. ‘Damnation, you’re my son, aint you? Twas I that gat him, did I not, madam?’ To which his wife would answer, with cold patience : ‘You are pleased to amuse yourself, Mr Marden.’ To the little boy, who made nothing of this that he could have put into words, his father was an impressive though unlovable personage when dressed in the grand clothes that were so seldom paid for ; but seen in bed, wigless and unshaven, as Jack once or twice saw him, he was a grotesque and almost terrifying spectacle, from which a child not yet ten was glad to run away to the shelter of his mother’s warm,

gay, mocking tenderness. Those were lonely years, though Jacky could not have told you that he was lonely. He could not be always with his mother, and except when his twin cousins from Stenham came visiting, Charles and Petronella, with the stately Aunt Chevenix and the uncle who was so much like Mamma, Jacky had no one of his own age to play with, and had perforce to spend much of his time alone. And he was kept ceaselessly busy in filling the emptiness he was unaware of. When the attractiveness of the actual was for a moment exhausted, he was quick to recreate it in terms of his childish imagination. He spun endless fantasy, peopling the house, the garden, the park, with imaginary boys and girls, with strange animals, with God and the angels of God, the Persons of the Trinity and the Holy Mother, and even with ghosts and goblins, sometimes terrifying himself in the process. But in the end he found the ideal companion in Nolly, the gradual creation of whom drained all vitality from these other phantoms and brought him much solace. Nolly was a boy of his own age. He and Nolly had been born on the same day, and therefore, argued Jacky, they were twins. Nolly was responsive to his every mood: he was always there when wanted yet never obtrusive. He could play and talk with Jacky; even quarrel with him (but they always made it up before parting); and he vanished instantly at the approach of a third person. Though he was Jacky's brother he made no claim on Mamma, to whom he was nothing,

indeed, but a shyly spoken name and the hero of a few fictions confided to her, and to no other in the world, by Jacky. At some points he differed from Jacky, being fair-haired and plump, whereas Jacky was a dark slim child ; and very brave in the dark, brave and strong, whereas Jacky knew himself timid. With Nolly at hand a boy could not only have fun, but in pursuit of fun could face dangers that might otherwise have daunted him. And apart from Father Gandy his tutor, he had no other male companionship, except sometimes, for a few minutes, that of Paul Dewdney the stableboy, whose mother, then a brisk woman of forty, was housekeeper to the Marden establishment. Paul was friendly, but at first shy of so small and strange a boy, whose eyes seemed so often to be exploring the invisible or to be turned in upon his own thoughts ; and he was shy, too, of appearing to be—in the estimation of his elders and betters—too familiar with his young master. So it fell out that in the earliest years their intercourse was confined to a brief exchange of question and answer. By means of this occasional catechism he learned much about horses that amused and delighted him, but he did not gain a friend comparable with Nolly, the friend of his dreams.

All this was changed by Mrs Marden's strange and sudden illness. It began with a fainting fit. She fell downstairs and struck her head on a small protruding feature of the carved newel-post and was carried unconscious to her bedroom by the Dewdneys, mother and son. Mr Marden, arriving three

days later in response to a hasty summons, snarled profusely at his domestics and studiously avoided meeting the desolate gaze of his son. Jacky, denied access to his mother, wandered like a pale wraith of himself about house and garden. Life lost its savour for him : the world was empty. And when, timidly or defiantly or with angry tears, he asked whether his mother was getting better and soon to come downstairs again, he was put off with palpable evasions. He was in the way ; there was trouble enough in the house without his adding to it ; he was assured that a really good and sensible child would be patient and ask no questions, for there were some things, many things indeed, that he couldn't understand. Mrs Dewdney was the author of these maxims, which betokened no unkindness of heart, nothing worse than natural stupidity augmented by an excess of anxious love for her mistress and quaking fear of her master. Father Gandy, being with the physician in constant attendance on the patient, was for the most part beyond reach of the boy's questions, which, at other times, he fended off by a benign and compassionate silence. In his few moments with his pupil he would talk much of God and the saints, but nothing of what was nearest his heart. And in this fashion many days passed, more days than Jacky could count, and at last, searching his mind for adequate reasons that should justify what he must do, he decided that Mamma could not be going to die, since the physician called more seldom than at first, and that if she

were not going to die she must be getting better, and therefore—blissful conclusion to the whole matter—she would be as glad to see him as he to see her; and no words could ever tell how great his gladness would be. In these days of famine he had become conscious of something that hitherto only his inarticulate heart had known: that his mother was his world, and the love that made him one with her the joy of joys, the very bread and wine of his existence. His decision was forced in the end by the suspicion, fruit of judicious eaves-dropping, that his elders were conspiring to send him away to the house of Aunt Chevenix. There he would have Charles and Petronella to play with, and of that thought was born a swift hatred of Charles and Petronella; for it was not they he wanted, it was his mother. If he could not have his mother he would have no one. And to go away without first seeing his mother—that was the blackest fear of all, a fear that filled him with bitterness and rage, which were presently, however, by force of his great need, translated into the quiet cunning, the similitude of patience, that would best serve him. He bided his time and watched his opportunity, and at last, one bright afternoon in May, he outwitted Mrs Dewdney's vigilance and approached the forbidden door. Feverish and trembling with the anticipation of joy, he tapped softly; then, getting no response, tapped again, less softly; and at last, unable to wait longer, seized on the door handle, turned it, and pushed the door

open by a few inches. But now, a new thought having visited him bringing remorse in its train, he was careful to make no noise ; and it was in low excited tones that he asked, without venturing further, 'Are you awake, Mamma?' There was silence, broken after an agony of waiting by the rustle of bedclothes and the sound of a smothered cough. 'Mamma,' he repeated, on the verge of tears, 'are you awake?' At that a voice answered him, a voice that at once thrilled and dismayed him, so like and unlike was it to the voice he greatly loved. Had illness done this to her? Yet what the voice said was even more dismaying: 'Who's that coming after me? What are you doing at my door?' And when he answered, stepping into the room, 'It's only me, Mamma,' the voice said impatiently: 'And who is me, pray?' He was inside the room now, or this last rebuff would perhaps have deterred him. As it was, it made him yearn more passionately than ever to find his mother. He stared with saucer eyes at the woman who sat in the great canopied bed. 'Well, Master Impudence,' said she, and with all its difference it was his mother's voice she used, 'since you've come I'll tell you a secret. Come hither, dearest, nearer, nearer. There's a black cat in the belfry tower. Diddums know that, my pretty?' Jacky could only stare. Her smile, glittering and false, froze his blood. 'And tell me,' said she, leaning towards him, 'whose little boy are you?'

He backed across the room, unable to unfix his

stare, and escaped into the passage. He ran downstairs, through the house, and out of it. Paul Dewdney, seeing his hurry, looked up with a friendly grin, and the next instant the child was clinging to him, screaming. 'Husha, Master Jacky, where've you caught hurt, my champion? Tell Paul where you've caught hurt.' But not yet could that tale be told. Indeed it was never fully told. After a storm of terror the child managed to falter out a few significant phrases, and Paul, who had sharper wits than most of his kind, guessed the rest. 'Ah, my dear, you mustn't mind her. Her've had a fall, dauntie see, on her poor head, poor lady. She baint herself, Master Jacky, not she. And God send she's not long for this world, as we all says, and who wouldn't? Now who's for a ride on the pony, Master Jacky? Pony's been asken after you, he has. Where's that Master Jacky away to, says Pony . . .'

And so, being come full circle, young Squire Marden's thoughts are back at Paul Dewdney, who now lies dead upstairs.

He had been absent in mind for but a moment, and now with a gesture he tried to shake off his load. 'Well, we must all come to it.' He turned again towards the priest, but would not meet his eyes. 'He was a faithful fellow. God rest him.'

'Amen,' said Father Gandy. When he spoke again, after a long silence, it was in a quietly conversational tone. 'Touching that other matter, my dear sir, I wish you may not distress yourself unduly

about it. My lord Endham must wait for his money, as many a better man has done before him. You were at fault, I grant you, in hazarding a sum so far beyond your immediate reach; and still more at fault in nursing the pride that plunged you into that extravagance. But . . .’

‘He thought me a bumpkin,’ interrupted the young man. ‘He thought me a country cousin who for very prudery dared not risk a high stake.’

‘The devil himself,’ said Father Gandy, ‘feigns to think us timid when we resist him. It is his chief weapon against young men of spirit. But listen, my friend. I have formed a resolution. Tonight you have lost a servant, and needs must think of finding another.’

‘True.’ But deuced early, thought he, to be talking of that.

‘What were Paul’s duties?’

‘You know them as well as I,’ answered Marden, a trifle stiffly. ‘Multifarious. Paul does . . . Paul did everything except what his mother did.’

‘What he did I can do,’ said Father Gandy. ‘No, listen. This is a thought I have long had maturing. I came to this household twenty years ago, as tutor to yourself and chaplain to the family. But now you need no tutor, and could make shift, I dare wager, without a chaplain. It is often in my mind that I am a lazy fellow, and you have done me the honour to confess that you are not a man of fortune.’

‘Enough of that,’ said Marden, almost roughly. ‘I shall find it hard to forgive you, Father Raphe,

if you abuse my confidence so far as to suppose that I could let you leave me . . .’

‘That was not my thought, and is not,’ said Father Gandy, with a half-bantering smile. ‘What I venture to propose is that I should ease my conscience at the expense of your comfort. Give me leave to be, in future, not a priest but a lay brother. Nay, I am serious, Jack. Call it a whim if you like, but it’s something more. It is my wish to wear the habit of humility, and scrub floors to the glory of God.’

‘Reverend sir,’ cried Marden in a tone of decision, ‘I cannot entertain so improper a notion . . .’

‘Say rather : Brother Raphe,’ said Raphe Gandy. ‘For I am resolved to have my way.’

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CHAPTER 3

TWO TRAVELLERS : AND OF THE PEBBLE THEY FLUNG INTO THE POOL

THE knocking on the tavern door startled the company. They sat staring with mouths agape, and something like alarm stirred among them when the knock was not immediately followed by an entry. Who could it be so timid as to await permission, or so arrogant as to demand ceremonious ushering-in? A woman? No, the rapping was peremptory, the work of no woman. A stranger certainly, for not even Coachy Timms himself could remember the last time a visitor had stood waiting to be admitted. This was an event, and they were alert with curiosity, all but Gipsy Noke, who thought ruefully of his unfinished song. He alone was angry with the stranger, telling himself that he cared not who it might be. This silence, emphasised by the ticking clock, quickened by the vibration of expectancy, endured for perhaps ten seconds, or less, and then the rapping was repeated, the potman went shuffling across the sanded floor, and at the same moment the door was flung open from the outside and a stranger came striding in. He was a lean swaggering fellow, muffled in a handsome cloak and wearing a three-cornered beaver-hat. His most

conspicuous feature was a large Roman nose, surmounted by heavy eyebrows that made a continuous arch from under which two deep-set eyes flashed scornfully.

It pleased this gentleman to fly into a towering rage.

‘God blind ye,’ cried he. ‘Why in thunder do you keep me standing at your door! Speak, fellow!’ he shouted at the trembling potman. ‘Is this a company of mutes?’

The landlord hurried forward, and bowed obsequiously. ‘Good evening, sir. Was your worship requiring anything?’

‘My worship,’ said the stranger bitterly, ‘is requiring a meal, a roof, and a bed, if such things are to be had in this benighted place.’

A shrill but not unmusical noise interrupted this dialogue. Coachy Timms was enjoying a joke.

‘Benighted, sir, now that’s a very true word, sir. Because why, says you. Because the sun be garn down, says I. Now that be the sooth of it in these parts. When sun goo down, then tis night-time. Tis haply otherways where you come from, sir?’

The stranger, affecting not to hear these remarks, addressed himself to Bailey. ‘Are you the landlord here, my good man?’

‘At your service, sir.’

‘Then be good enough to see to the horses. On one of them you’ll find a lady. To be plain with you, my sister. Do you hear, landlord?’

‘Will the lady be taking a meal, sir, same as yourself?’

‘To be sure she will. Do you expect her to take her supper from a nosebag with the horses?’

This sally so greatly amused its author as to put him at once into a better humour. ‘Get along, old blockhead,’ he said gaily, slapping the landlord on the back, ‘persuade your good woman to prepare a meal for us, the best she can muster. And I will go bring the lady in.’ The better to display his magnificence, he removed his hat, revealing a stylish wig tied at the nape with a black ribbon.

Mr Bailey, being a somewhat timid man with an excessive respect for the gentry, was slightly confused by the variety of his instructions, and stood like a dog at a fair, not knowing which way to run : whether to set about stabling the horses or to rouse his wife from her kitchen and set her busying herself in the preparation of a meal. He was a man of sensibility, reflective by nature, distrustful of impulse. Having allowed this stranger to begin teaching him his duty as host, he seemed as unable to disregard his tutor’s orders as to execute them. But, the stranger offering no further remarks, but swaggering out into the road, the landlord was left with no alternative but to collect his own wits and obey their prompting. He followed his imperious guest, saw the lady assisted to the ground, and taking the two horses by their bridles led them round the house to the stables, which were approached from the other side. In his brief absence the potman had

warned Mrs Bailey of what was toward, and Bailey returned to find that the gentleman and his sister had been conducted by that resourceful woman to the private parlour, where, by the intervention of a stout oak door, their ears would be protected from the conversation of low persons. No sooner, however, had Mr Bailey resumed his seat by the fire, with perhaps some hope of hearing what remained of the unfinished song, than that same oak door was opened, and a voice summoned him.

‘Ask the company to drink our health, my good man,’ commanded the stranger.

Mr Bailey, protesting that his honour was too kind, received sundry silver coins and came back into the public room with a respectful smile still lingering about his lips. ‘A pleasant enough gentleman,’ he remarked, ‘if you know how to manage him. And what if he does talk like a play-actor—there’s room for all sorts in the world, surely? When first he came he was all for damning us and swearing and blaspheming, but when he saw I wasn’t a man to be treated so, did ye mark the change in him, neighbours? It comes of knowing how to handle folk. I claim no credit for it.

*Those that I serve, I make them serve my turn :
Teach me the world and pay me as I learn.*

Why, we’re as thick as thieves now, he and I. We might have been born brothers.’

‘Thieves,’ said Coachy Timms, ‘is a good word

and a true. But if you was yarnder gennelman's brother, Mus Bailey, I'd as lief be pullen your nose as drinken good ale in your parlour. And talken of saucy coxcombs,' went on Coachy, raising his voice a little, 'talken of fine gennelmen with more money than manners, and more manners than arnesty, and more arnesty than looks, God help 'em ; and talken of a gimsey jackass as comes asken beds of arnest folk when what he do need is a halter, twould do me good, neighbours, and twould do my heart good, and twould give my old eyes a rare cantle of joy, to have such in the shafts before me, harnessed tight and true, and drive him on his hands and knees down Glatting road in flood.'

'He sartain sure do make a countable gurt hoe about naun,' said Mykelborne. 'And now we'll haply have the dregs of our song, Gipsy. Always so be there's no bawdry to it, for tis too late an hour for bawdry.'

'Now why,' asked Tom Shellett, with that air of profound sagacity which a few hours steady drinking will induce even in the least philosophical of us, 'now why do ee say that, Mus Mykelborne? What matter do time o' day make? A pot o' beer be a pot o' beer, and good drinken, whether tis breakfast or supper or no time at all. Likewise a plate o' beef be a plate o' beef, or I'm much bewildered.'

'Tis this way, Tahm,' began Mykelborne——

'A fairer plan yet,' said Coachy Timms, 'a fairer plan yet ud be to give Lubin the driven of un.

Ay, set my Lubin in the driver's seat, with reins holden and whip to hand, and liddle Lard Lollop in the shafts. Ah, he were a gennelman, were Lubin. It's him desarved a dilly-down bed if anyone did. And pretty a'd have looked,' added Coachy, peering into the bottom of his mug, 'pretty a'd have looked lyen under a silk healing.'

'Ah,' put in Mr Bailey, 'there was a gentleman in London, a writing gentleman, that had just such another fancy as that. By and by I shall recall his name for you. Horses are human cattle and fit to teach men their manners. That was his idea.'

'And that's the Lard's gospel,' said Coachy. 'Now Gipsy, my lad, where's that song o' yourn?'

'I have it!' cried Mr Bailey, excited and complacent. 'Swift was his name. Swift.'

'That it worn't,' said Coachy indignantly. 'Naun of the kind. Swift by nature, if you like, my coney; but Lubin was his name, as I've telled ee, and who should know better?'

'The way of it be this, 'Tahm Shellest,' said Mykelborne, with owlsh stare and inebriate unction, 'there be a time for everything, likewise a due season, as the Book tells. There be a time for gotten up of a marnen, and a time for gwain to bed. There be a time for laughen and a time for weepen. There be a time for swillen and swearen and suchlike lewdness, and a time for sitten quiet and godly by your own fireside. There be a time to be born and a time to be bedded. Mark that, Tahm Shellest. Mark that, Coachy Timms. And do you mark that

too, Mus Bailey. Time and time and a dividen of time : twas Postle Paul said that, Tahm Shellett, and you wouldn't set yourself up to know better than Postle Paul, a common sinful cowherd as we all know you to be. If Postle Paul says keep your breeches on, on you maun keep 'em, and drink a liddle wine for your stomach-ache same as Timothy, and that's a holy text. But if Postle Paul says take 'em off, Tahm Shellett, if Postle Paul says take off they breeches and gird up thy loins with the shield of righteousness and the breastplate of fortication, then off you may take 'em, Tahm Shellett, and goo to ut like a man, and be damned to ee. And I should like to meet the man,' said Mykelborne, rising from his seat in indignation and resuming it with some abruptness, 'I should like to meet the man as would give me the lie to that, which is good gospel and naun better. Be he great or be he small, be he rich or be he poor, be he sickness and health till death us do part, I should like to meet un.'

'A good knowledgeable piece of talk!' said Coachy Timms, with surprising benevolence. 'You've a bly of your father about you, Dick Mykelborne. As to time, here be another puzzle that do tarrify me. What *be* time? What be ut, I say?'

'Ah,' murmured Mykelborne, giving compliment for compliment, 'now there be a clever dubersome question for you, Tahm Shellett.'

'Ah,' said Tom Shellett, stroking his stringy neck.

‘Touching that matter,’ said Mr Bailey, ‘I remember that when I was a younger man I wrote a copy of verses about Time. If you’ll bear with me——’

Enjoying his triumph, Coachy Timms glowed upon the company and repeated his mot: ‘What *be* time?’

‘That’s a tarrible true word,’ said Mykelborne, slowly nodding his head.

‘You can’t eat un,’ continued Coachy. ‘You can’t drink un. You can’t get un wi’ child. What do us folks want with un? Now a harse, there’s sense in a harse. You can ride a harse, and drive a harse, and call cousins with un. But time, tis nuther here nor there, tis nuther my ankle nor my elbow. It daun’t keep a man warm of nights. It daun’t feed him or clothe him. It do naught but turn his beard white and make his teeth fall out and sharten his wind and send him all doddlish into the dark ditch to make an end of all. He’s no manner of good to poor folks, this Time. Tis all a boffle and a blunder and we were best rid of him, neighbours.’

‘Tarrible true,’ repeated Mykelborne. ‘And why daun’t Government do something, the pack of fine rascals?’

‘But no,’ said Coachy firmly, ‘he goo on and on, whether us wants him or not. On and on he goo, and there’s no stoppen un. Now if I had the driving of un: Not so fast, my fine gennelman, I’d say. And I’d handle they reins to shew un who

was master, and I'd pull un to a standstill if I had to lift un on his two legs like a Christian, and leave him kick his fill. But Time's no harse, more's the pity. Time's no harse. He be water that slip through the fingers, he be wind that goo by. But he's with us to the last, and if you scape him, tis as good as sayen you're dead and gone. He daun't visit the tomb, nor be halted there; in that quiet place there be never blink nor breath of un, and the patter of's feet runnen past do make no hurry nor commotion to a man lyen at rest, for he daun't stay at the tomb: there be naun to the purpose there: he's away in the fields where there's bright summer to sport with, and blossom to shake down, and leaves to trample, and lusty fine lovers to watch growen old and winded. Lie you down once and for all and he'll leave you be. But that's not Coachy's way,' said Coachy, with a serene smile. 'I haply can't catch him, and I haply can't dodge him, but I can keep him company, and I can speak my bosom, and we'll see who gets beazled first.'

Silence fell. There was no sound but the sound of drinking and loud breathing and the burble of the fire on the hearth. Coachy seemed to have fallen asleep. Mr Bailey stared at the fire. Gipsy brooded on the vanity of life, and the injustice of a fate that would cut short a smart man's song. Roger Peakod grinned vacantly, peering from face to face. And Tom Shellett's gaping mouth shewed Tom Shellett to be engaged in deep thought.

Mykelborne, emerging from a muttering reverie,

looked up, looked round him, with the air of a man visited with a new and powerful idea.

‘But what I say is this, friends. What I do is to put a plain question. Time. That’s the question. Time. We be talken of time, bain’t us? Am I right, friends, or am I wrong?’

‘I take your meanen,’ said Tom Shellett, admiringly. ‘There’s no doubt, no manner of doubt, Mus Mykelborne, that you be a thinker. If there was more such——’

‘Very well then,’ said Mykelborne. ‘Now you may say this, and,’ he added, with generous concession, ‘you may say that. But what I say is this: what *is* this time, and what may it be?’

‘Ay, that’s a question right enough.’

‘Now listen to me, friends. Listen to me, one and all. Ask me this: what do Postle Paul say about time? And I answer: Just these two words. Time and tide, says Postle Paul, waits for no man. Which he spoke in parables for such as be of poor understanding, like poor Peakod here, or like yourself, Tahm Shellett. And which he meant that time and tide, you follow me so far, doon’t wait for no one, be he high, *or*,’—the speaker paused and let his voice sink impressively into his boots—‘be he low.’

‘Or be he low,’ echoed Shellett intelligently. ‘I see what you mean, Mus Mykelborne.’

‘Which is to say that this here Time, accorden to Postle Paul, and he’s Holy Writ as we all know, this here Time won’t wait for you, Tahm Shellett,

nor yet for you, Coachy Timms, nor yet again for Mus Bailey, nor none of us, any mother's son.'

There was no dissenting voice. The interpretation was accepted.

'And here's another thing about time,' said Mykelborne, 'and a tarrible strange thing, and a pretty thing, and a brave scholarly piece of work though I says ut. Listen here, neighbours. Mark my words and use your minds. Sometimes tis five o'claack, and sometimes tis six o'claack. Did you ever give thought to that, neighbours?' He savoured his subtlety with a tender smile, and struggled carefully to his feet. With the instinct of the artist he knew that this was the right moment for departure. He would step from the peak of his triumph into the night, leaving his audience dazzled. He steered a jerky zig-zag course towards the door, and turned with his hand on the latch to say his parting word. 'There be food for thought in that, my friends. Rich toothsome food. Food and drink and merry tomorrow we die, as Postle Paul said.'

With Mykelborne gone, the others began to think of moving. It had wanted but his example to set their thoughts towards home and bed. The talk seemed over, the money was spent, the genial spirit of Coachy Timms was away visiting the borderlands of sleep. One after another, but in a swift series, they rose, muttered their farewells, and filed into the street, leaving Bailey alone with his thoughts, his two strange guests, and Coachy, who sat quiet and still and with eyes closed but in an upright

posture curiously at variance with the idea of sleep. Bailey, staring down at the old man, wondered for a moment whether to rouse him and send him on his way. But a harsh voice calling for wine set him hurrying about his proper business.

‘Coming, sir. Coming.’

‘Do you keep wine in this house, landlord?’ asked our gentleman, with the air of a judge who has made up his mind to hang the prisoner no matter what he may answer.

‘Yes, your honour. Whatever your honour pleases.’

‘Indeed!’ The eyebrows went up, and the eyes widened. ‘I little thought to find it so.’

‘Tis my duty and privilege, your honour, to supply Squire Marden’s table from time to time. Now Squire has a liking for Mountain, your honour. A smooth and delicate drop of liquor is Mountain, which I would venture to recommend as well for its cheerful influence on the mind as for the refined pleasure which, *quod bene notandum*, it offers to the palate of a gentleman of taste.’

‘Ah,’ said the stranger, with a sneer, ‘you are a scholar, I find.’

‘No, sir. That I would not venture to claim, sir. Well, since it pleases you to insist, perhaps I am a little in that line, though my poor learning has been a-rusting these many years.’

*When we our books perforce must put away,
We join with Time to plot our wits’ decay.’*

‘And a poet too, by Jupiter ! Faith, you are a very paragon of innkeepers. Harkee, my dear love,’ roared the stranger, turning to his lady, ‘we’re lodged luckily tonight, with a landlord who talks Greek one minute and poetry the next. But that don’t quench our thirst, my good fellow. Your own was quenched an hour or more ago, I fancy, hey ?’ With this last question the stranger flashed at him a piercing glance, as though something of consequence depended on his answer. But Bailey, intoxicated less by the little he had drunk than by the pleasure of being noticed, was not to be discouraged by sharpness. His spirit soared ; he was in a mood to be discreetly merry, being conscious of the bright eyes of a young woman, and already transported to a time when he himself, with a little more luck and a spice of gallantry in his making, might have won just such a beauty for his own. He could not but notice that she was a personable and elegant creature, very genteel in her dress, very modest in her manners, and yet, he was fain to admit, with something of boldness as well as shyness in her, an enchanting mixture ; for at times her eyes would sparkle saucily, her red lips pout as though to tempt a man to kissing, and at other times, when the gentleman was roaring his loudest and proudest, she would gaze with a wonder that was half fear, and let her mouth fall childishly open like any country wench. She sat very quiet, and, but for an occasional small laugh such as a less partial observer than Bailey might have called a giggle,

and but for saying at intervals 'La, sir, I wonder at you!', she seemed content to let her eyes do her speaking, which they did very effectively, working considerable pleasant havoc in Mr Bailey's heart.

'I may not deny, sir,' said he, 'that I have quaffed somewhat in my day of the Pierian springs, but in the matter of strong waters of the more carnal sort and kind I acquit myself of immoderation. Inn-keeper I am, as your honour has wittily said. Which is to say I keep an inn, and *quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, as the poet Juvenal inquires. And the answer to that, sir, if I may make bold to formulate it, is that 'tis your good self, and your like, who by your distinguished patronage of my humble house keep me alive and my inn standing.'

The stranger stared with scornful astonishment for a moment. Then he burst out laughing, and laughed his fill. 'Devil take your pedantry,' he said, recovering speech. 'Go fetch me a bottle of your best sack. And see here, my good fellow. Since you're so sociable, you may share it with us and give us the benefit of your learned conversation.'

In a very few minutes, for the innkeeper could move quickly when he chose, the bottle was broached and the conversation in full career. 'I'll wager you could tell a good story, had you a mind to,' said the stranger, waxing civil. 'Tis very evident that you're no ordinary man. You're a man that's seen better fortunes, or I'm no judge of men. I'm eager to hear how you came to your present station, from what, I make no doubt, was a position of no little

elegance and refinement.' The gratified landlord was as eager to tell as his guest to hear; but the story, despite this common hunger for it, was subjected to a series of small delays. For first, it seemed, the stranger must be told something of the neighbourhood to which his travels had mysteriously brought him. Which was the nearest big town? Was Dyking Common accounted safe for a gentleman to cross on horseback? This Mr Root, the Glatting magistrate, was he a man of substance and spirit who could be relied upon to do his duty? Was Mr Marden of the Fee a brisk fellow? And, finally, since the lady was nervous of her safety, the gentleman her brother wished to be assured that she need have no anxiety while under this roof. 'I hope you have honest servants about you, landlord, and can handle a pistol with credit. For myself, I carry no firearms. Foolish perhaps. Reckless, my friends tell me. But that's my way,' said he jauntily. 'And, to be plain with you, I have something in my custody at this moment that would be worth a man's risking his neck for.'

Mr Bailey stared his admiration. 'Indeed, sir, but you had best be careful in such parts as these. I can answer for my own household, and this is an honest godfearing village enough, this Marden Fee. But twas no great distance from here, not above twenty mile, that yon terrifying fellow Jim Dander was at his villainous work.'

'Say no more, my friend,' said the stranger, 'or you'll send my poor sister into ten thousand

vapours. Come, fill up, fill up. And then for your story.'

Mr Bailey willingly complied. 'You hit the mark, sir,' said he, 'when you hint that I have seen better fortunes than could be guessed from my present circumstances. *Eheu fugaces labuntur anni*. Though in sooth I was my own enemy and proved so. My father was a gentleman and a man of substance. He designed to make a parson of me, but for this reason and for that I found myself at eighteen years of age acting as usher in a school for the sons of gentlemen. I was a young man of sufficient parts to entertain without impropriety the ambition of becoming headmaster; and I am persuaded that such would indeed have been my destiny had not the ardour of my temperament led me to commit an indiscretion which my respect for your lady sister forbids that I should more particularly describe. Thank you, sir. The merest sip. Your very good health, madam. Ah, the follies of youth, how small they seem in retrospect, how easily forgiven! But my father took a stern view of this misdemeanour . . .'

The gentleman was on his feet. 'That was a shame, friend, so it was. We're vastly obliged to you, pon my soul we are. And now shew us our beds and we'll wish you good night. Ha ha, took a stern view, did he? As good a tale as I've heard these three months. It shall go the round of the coffee-houses, I promise you.'

Returning to the public parlour after shewing his

guests to their rooms, Mr Bailey, sobered and a little sorry for himself, found Coachy Timms sitting where he had left him.

‘Rouse up, old gentleman.’

‘Eh?’ Coachy was awake.

‘Time to go, friend. Come, you’re in a sad way if you need telling that. Tis time to go, I say.’

Coachy nodded. ‘Tis a winter-proud night, my coney. I’d as lief stay where I be.’

‘And so you could and welcome, friend. But I’ve not a bed left spare in the house. And the wife would take it amiss if she found you here in the morning. Come, rouse up.’

Without a word Coachy got out of his chair and began moving towards the street door. He opened it and the sky entered to meet him. He stared out at the scintillation. ‘Ay, tis a rare brimmer tonight. Frost and stars a-plenty, and print-moonlight. Could a man light his innards with that glory, he’d have owdacious fine dreams to his bed.’

His foot was across the threshold when Mr Bailey called him back with a loud whisper.

‘Eh?’ said Coachy. ‘What’s afoot now?’

‘If you had a sister, Coachy Timms,’ said Mr Bailey, ‘would you call her your dear love?’

‘Eh?’ said Coachy. ‘Say ut once more, my coney.’

Mr Bailey said it again. ‘And yet,’ he added, half to himself, ‘they act like sister and brother, whatever their speech. For they have each a room to sleep in, as proper and nice as you please.’

Coachy shook his head sadly. 'That daun't make sense. If I'd a sister, would I call her my dear love? No, that I woon't. And if I'd a dear love I woon't call her sister, nuther.' His moonlit face creased in an elfish smile. 'I'd call her my jolly, I'd call her my dimple, I'd call her my primy lass. Doxy and deary I'd call her, and heartsease, and gillyvor, and marnen glory. I'd see her eat hearty and step pretty, and I'd see Goodman Time run past and never mark her. Where be Coachy's fine fillikin, he'd say; for I'll have my due of her, be she never so brisky. She be gone that way, I'd tell him, and this way, and that way. And I'd send him down one road after t'other, the sorry geck, and see him lose his labour . . . God-a-mercy, neighbour, and give you good night, what little be left of it. There baint above an admiral's pint, by the moon's look.'

CHAPTER 4

MR BAILEY'S MOON : HOW HE CRIED FOR IT AND
GOT IT, AND HINTS OF WHAT IT WAS MADE OF

ERASMUS BAILEY, left alone in the sleeping house, became sharply aware of the quietness, and of the voice of his thought speaking in it. He was aware of that voice as of something hardly his own, something that came from a great distance. To be alone was luxury : he was so seldom alone. And to be alone on such a night as this, with Coachy Timms just gone, and with his mind curiously stirred by wine and talk and the flattering attentions of a real lady and a real gentleman, was an experience of rare quality. The talk had taken him back to a time when he had been a smart young usher, with golden prospects, a sparkling eye, and no little aptitude for learning. Perhaps his eye sparkled more in memory than it had ever done in fact ; perhaps those vanished prospects seemed more golden now than they had seemed to the young man himself ; perhaps his learning had not amounted to much. For that is the way of us : we must needs sharpen the knife of past felicity before leaning our sentimental breast upon its point. Had he not been busy at this moment in disparaging his present state at the expense of his past, he must have recognized—for alone with

himself he was not witless—that the young man he contemplated neither had within reach, nor truly desired, a brilliant worldly career. At best he would have been a country schoolmaster lording it timidly among the humble villagers and paying in his turn obsequious deference to the gentry. If it pleased the young man to dress up that modest ambition in fine raiment, if he made some little parade of his knowledge and liked to fancy himself a gallant among the ladies, it was all, though he knew it not, a kind of make-believe designed to conceal the romantic excess of his heart's true desire. At the core of him, to himself unknown, or known only in wild intuitive flashes, was a fantastic dream of some ultimate and all-sufficing self-fulfilment. Of whence comes this ache that drives, this star that seduces us; or whether, drifting each in his lonely night, we are sparks of one fire and vainly seeking a return to our source; or made in pairs, Jack and Jill, as romantic persons tell us, and sundered by birth and sent each in quest of our twin; or dupes of a blind power that has no thought beyond that of multiplication; whether we are moved, not by love as we conceive it, but by the dynamics of the blood, the chemistry of attraction, the course of the stars, a word uttered before ever the atoms began dancing; whether (in fine) the soul is a self-flattering conceit or (which is no less probable) the body a creation of mad fancy; whether sex is the beginning of desire, or its end, or its imperfect instrument, and desire the sum of human loves or only their lowest common

factor ; whether all meaning is not of our own idle making, and thought a disease, and speculation a vanity ; whether the Eternal is the true goal of all our striving, and whether the Eternal is not Death himself in his church-going guise ; whether it is, or not, a laughing matter for the gods, this riot of sublimities, and whether, if gods there be, they have, as we have, imperative need of such laughter to distract them from the heartache and beauty and busy emptiness of the universe they have created—of these questions young Erasmus Bailey took no account, for he was never called upon to entertain them. Nor did he now, a much older man, pause to conceive or to consider such unprofitable matters, though he did, as he had too often done since the event itself, pause to ask himself by what trick of the brain or the blood that young usher had been led to suppose, even for one adventurous instant, that he might find his dream, his fair remote fancy warmly embodied, in the bed of a plump placid amiable and acquiescent maidservant. That one escapade, he being what he was, had been the cause of what he now chose to regard, somewhat melodramatically (but there is comfort in that), as his downfall. He could not find it in his heart to blame the girl (of whom a leaner and more masterful version was at this moment snoring in the room overhead) unless she was to blame for having submitted too readily to his first stolen kiss and for having smiled thereafter with a certain sentimental emphasis. She had done no more than that : for

the rest she had offered neither resistance nor very positive encouragement. There was no vice in her ; she was quiet, simple, mildly maternal ; and if you asked love of her, well why not ? Nor did she prove to be a passionate woman. It was her pleasure to be kind, and Mr Bailey was a pretty enough gentleman, and clever too, they said. Fancy his liking her !—she dimpled at the thought. And that was that. But it was not all. For young Bailey had not been the first to discover Sarah's complaisant nature, nor even the first in that household ; and when the girl became big with his child, and the whole story must come out, his master resolved that the shameless pair should be made an example of. In this resolution he had the hearty support of his wife, who had never liked the hussy's looks, and as for Bailey, said she, he was as full of his own importance as she didn't know what. Before many hours had passed the hounds were in full cry, the Squire who loved law, the Parson who loved virtue, and the Mob who loved wholesome fun. The sinners were haled to the pillory, there to be taught good manners with such taunts and missiles as came to hand ; thence they were conducted to church, where, in mid-service, and clad in penitential white, they made public confession of their sin ; and finally, with every inducement to love one another, they were joined together in holy matrimony and driven out of the village. Their reception by Bailey senior, to whom after many adventures and misadventures they naively presented

themselves, would perhaps have been kindlier had not rumour of their public humiliations preceded them. To get a young woman with child was in his eyes a trivial mischance. He could have forgiven that; he could even, at a pinch, have stomached the marriage of his dull prosing son to a country serving wench; but the stocks and the ceremonial confession proved too much for his pride, and disgust wrought so fiercely in him that Erasmus accounted himself lucky, as indeed he was, to find himself, within a little while, established as the landlord of a village inn as remote from his father's house as from the scene of his own disaster. Here he had remained, and here he is now, pretending to regret his negligible loss of status in order by that pretence to hide from himself his real regret. And the endeavour succeeds, baffling both himself and us. His phantom trouble, even though we catch a glimpse of it mistily haunting him, is too vague for definition, too quickly gone, now here now away, to be caught in any category of our devising. The question that comes to him in this quiet and solitary moment is subtle and secret, like the night breath of flowers, like the finger of moonlight laid upon his hand. It is gone before his mind can begin to frame it. Can it be the moon, a mere reflector, that makes this music in us? And is it a moon, no more and no less, that this music sets us desiring?

Having made fast the doors, Mr Bailey turned his reluctant thoughts towards bed. The night was

far advanced, but he felt wakeful, alert, excited ; very much in the mood for adventure. Indeed in his own estimation he was already enjoying an adventure. The lady's eyes had looked kindly upon him when she wished him good night ; and throughout that all too brief interview with the strange pair he had been aware of a brightness in the wine, a flame and a delight, more disturbing than anything the grape could yield. The idea of bed repelled him. To smother this young expectancy in a blanket of sleep was not to be thought of ; and to lie awake, with Sarah sleeping at his side, was still less to his fancy. He remembered, with a sort of relief, that the table at which his guests had taken their meal had been left in disorder. Here was something to do : a task outside his province indeed, but nevertheless a legitimate reason for not going to bed, and one having the additional advantage that it would save his daughter trouble in the morning, to say nothing of his wife's temper. It was true that if Sarah woke and found him not in bed she would be perplexed and by her perplexity irritated ; for she regarded the unusual, even the trivial unusual, with suspicion and dislike, herself being a person of fixed unalterable habits, a clockwork woman. But Sarah would not wake : she was safe asleep until the appointed hour for rising, and then, prompt to the minute, she would sit up, swing her plump legs out of bed, and sit for five thoughtful seconds on its edge before remarking : ' Time to be stirring, Bailey ! ' In the beginning it had been ' Mr Bailey',

but time works wonders, and in twenty years the girl who had sirred him, and without irony, at her first surrender, had become a matron bold and casual enough to address him familiarly and think nothing of it. She had learned to take him and his odd little ways for granted; and it was his misfortune, though not perhaps a great one, that he had never learned to do the same with her. At moments he caught a glimpse of the girl she had been, and then it was in his heart to weep for her. She was a good wife, honest and faithful and stupid. But her goodness was dull and her stupidity a devastation, and it was this stupidity alone—for the years had dealt gently with her buxom person—that prevented her being handsome. With one gleam of wit, one flash of fancy, she might have been a beautiful woman: she was capable of neither. Each partner to the other was both a nuisance and a comfort; above all, a habit. Bailey was constantly trying not to wish that he had never married his wife, and often he succeeded. Tonight, as he busied himself with his self-imposed scullery duties, he made no such endeavour. A good wife, but she was not the moon, and—here lay the sting—he had never for a moment imagined that she was.

There was still some wine left in the bottle provided by the affable and generous stranger. Mr Bailey, sighing reverently in the direction of the young lady's bedroom, fetched a clean glass, filled it, and drank to her bright eyes. Even so there remained a little wine, and this last morsel came like a

benediction and a triumph, crowned his spirit with fire, and fortified him for further eccentricities of behaviour. He went back to the public parlour, rekindled the fire on the hearth, and reseated himself on the settle. He invoked his Muse, fishing from his pocket a notebook and a stub of pencil the further to encourage her. This was the night of nights; this, pre-eminently, an occasion most auspicious for the wooing of sweet Poesy. A quiet night, a lovely woman, a man fallen from greatness—what a theme! As for the form of his verses, that troubled him not at all: his fancy seldom ranged beyond the couplet, which he had so assiduously practised as a young man in emulation of his betters. And now the golden numbers came rolling into his mind:

*Truth will prevail, and may not be deny'd :
A lovely woman is Creation's Pride.
By Condescension, wheresoe'er she goes,
She makes the Desert blossom as the Rose.
Weak in her person, mighty in her charm,
Commands Compassion and provokes Alarm.
Her smiles and conversation, be she kind,
Delight the Sense and elevate the Mind ;
And if she check our gallantry perforce,
Sweet is Correction from so sweet a source.
Disdaining Pomp, she rules by Love alone,
Beauty her sceptre, Modesty her throne.*

*And now, O Muse, let Lachrymation flow,
In gentle Tribute to thy Poet's woe,*

*Who finds himself, though kindled in her flame,
Wedded by Folly to a prior Claim.
Yet stay ! For how could such an One as he,
Aspire to win her young Felicity !
And how . . .*

These lines, to their author, seemed singularly delicate and expressive. He read them through several times, and they completed his intoxication. He was astonished by his facility in composition ; nor paused to wonder whether in his sober morning senses he would think so highly of himself and his verses. But already he was conscious of a diminishing flow of inspiration : ‘ her young Felicity ’ did not altogether satisfy him. It had an extravagant air ; it was over-fanciful : and, moreover, was it not rather his own felicity, were she won, that should be celebrated ? This she of whom he sung was a phantom lady, nameless and formless and perhaps too fair for mortal imagining ; but he could not deny that she looked at him now with the eyes, and spoke with the alluring lips, of one in whose company he had recently drunk wine. Even Mrs Lavender was forgotten : pretty young Mrs Lavender for whom he cherished a discreet tenderness, which was rekindled every time he received string or soap or candles across the counter of her husband’s little shop in the High Street. The fair stranger reigned unchallenged in his thoughts. In rapt if somewhat muddled contemplation of his work, and with numerous alternative rhymes to ‘ he ’ ringing in

his mind, he fell asleep where he sat. At first he was vaguely aware of being asleep, and a drowsy satisfaction at not being in bed, at being adventurously carousing with the Muses in the small hours of the morning, like the gallant fellow he was, pursued him across the borderland and lent its colour to the crowding images of dream. But presently he quite lost sight of the waking world ; his dreams came closer, surrounding him, shutting him in ; he went on a long and strange voyage and gathered the fruits of eternal orchards. And then it seemed as though he were back again in his inn parlour, and watching through half-closed eyes a man in a dark cloak and a three-cornered hat tip-toeing towards the street door. He saw this apparition stop, stare in his direction, and remain for a moment very rigid, as though taking stock of him ; then turn with careful step, and, proceeding on his way, draw the bolt of the door, lift the latch, and step into the moonlight. A very vivid dream, thought Mr Bailey ; for he seemed positively to feel the cold air stealing in upon him from the street. But the door closed, and he sank again into deep slumber, to be roused presently by a sharp metallic clatter from outside. I know that sound, said he, with deep satisfaction : that's horses, that is. Not one horse, but two horses. Wedded by Folly to a prior Claim. He had some notion of getting out of his seat to investigate this matter ; he remembered his dream and wondered if aught was amiss. But now the clatter of hooves was a diminishing music ;

it vanished, beautifully, into an enchanted distance, into a past epoch, a golden time, a land misty with promise of love and idleness and a school of one's own and a book of verses bound in morocco with the name of Erasmus Bailey Esquire on the title-page. 'Pretty! Very pretty!' he said aloud. 'Clacketty clacketty clacketty clacketty . . . and away we go.' The sound of his own voice, the movement of his own tongue, wakened him fully. He rubbed his eyes and his head; he yawned prodigiously, shivered a little, and got up. Vaguely disturbed in mind, and with some idea of putting everything right, he made his way to the door, opened it, and looked out. No one there. He nodded sagaciously at the empty street, as if to say 'What did I tell you?' He wagged an admonitory forefinger at himself. 'That noise, Erasmus,' said he, 'was my fine gentleman taking his leave without paying his reckoning. God save the King, and confusion to traitors!' The night air refreshed him; he stood for some few minutes quietly relishing its sharp assault.

When at last he turned back into the room he found he was not alone in it. After the brightness of the sky the firelit room was dim, but it seemed to Mr Bailey that someone, a woman, had tried to slip past him through the doorway. He shut the door with decision, and shot the bolt. There were to be no more fugitives from his tavern tonight. Then he faced her, the woman of his dreams. For in this place of shadows, this moment of magic, she

was that, though earlier she had been no more than a hint of it. Bright eyes, a heaving bosom, black hair in heavenly disarray, and the whole effect that of a frightened lovely proud defiant daughter of moonlight—here was romance for you. She stood clutching her silk gown about her breasts: whether it was her only garment Mr Bailey dared not surmise (dared not but did, and spared no time to rebuke himself for the liberty of his thoughts). The cup of his night, this strange exhilarating night, was filled to the brim. He stood and stared, tasting its wonder, waiting for the woman to speak but not caring whether she spoke or not.

‘Oh it’s you, landlord! I declare you quite terrified me.’

‘Nay, madam,’ he stammered, ‘I had rather suffer hanging than cause you a moment’s disquiet.’

He came nearer. The habit of servility being discarded, tossed aside, shrivelled up in the romantic fire of this moment, his attitude was gallant, his eyes discreetly admiring. This was his hour, and he was equal to it. This, this was his hour and he asked no more than to be saved from an anticlimax.

At his movement she shrank back a pace and fell into a pretty confusion. ‘To have exposed myself thus . . . as it were in my very shift!’

‘Madam,’ said he, with a deprecating gesture, ‘my profound respect, my sincere devotion, my . . . my sense of the incomparable privilege . . . these alone were sufficient to clothe you, had you nothing else.’

She tittered. 'La, sir! What fine language you have, to be sure!'

It was not the answer he would have chosen for her. Nor would he have wished her to titter. But in his present exalted mood he was incorrigible. As he had made of her the impossible fulfilment of his dream, so he would turn her dross into gold, her speech and her titters into the very music of love. His alchemy was swift and unconscious and irresistible.

'You are in . . . in trouble, madam?'

She wrung her hands. Even at risk of further exposure she wrung her hands, and the gesture was infinitely alluring. 'Alas, yes . . . Tell me, landlord, did you hear anything? I was awakened by a noise and I thought . . .' Her voice died away; her hand fluttered towards him; like a bird, he thought, like a bird seeking its nest.

He took the hand and bowed over it. 'Was it the noise of horses you heard?' he asked, with a hint of tenderness tinging his respect.

He thought she nodded, but she did not answer his question. 'Have you seen aught of my brother?' she asked. 'How dark it grows here,' she added, drawing away from him. 'It would better become me to go back to my room than stand here conversing so freely with a stranger.'

She spoke to be contradicted, as even Mr Bailey was quick enough to see. He was enchanted by her coquetry. This was the game as it should be played; and he was not, he vowed, the man to disappoint her.

He hastened to reassure her and to plead that she might stay a while yet. 'It would desolate me to be denied the honour of learning the nature of your anxiety and of assisting you with such poor counsel as I am competent to offer.' Involuntarily he began revolving in his mind a couplet upon this theme, for the habit of years is strong; but, shaking free of the untimely temptation, he remarked: 'As for the darkness of the room, I will see to it.' He strode—and 'strode' is accurate, for he was already a new man—to the hearth, thrust a taper into the flame of a blazing faggot, and with the taper lighted a tall candle. For this service he was richly rewarded. In shadow she had been a warm exciting mystery: in candlelight she was visibly and dangerously a woman. With a delicious shiver—movement careless enough to seem the symbol of an understanding between them, yet queenly enough to keep his thoughts still at an admiring distance—she came towards the hearth and stationed herself within reach of its warmth.

'I confess,' she said, 'that I am anxious. It is my brother.'

'Whom I saw,' remarked Mr Bailey, with a rallying air, 'making off with your horses not many minutes ago.'

'You saw him!' She seemed incredulous, indignant.

'Your pardon, madam. The rebuke is just. That I saw him with the horses cannot be maintained. But I saw him pass through this room and go out by

that door. A while afterwards I heard horses trotting away. Not one horse, but more than one; and, as I conjecture, two. I think it no very bold fancy to connect the one event with the other: *idest*, the gentleman with the horses.'

The lady cast a mournful look at him. 'Then tis as I feared.' She covered her face with her hands and turned away, a picture of desolation. But she quickly regained something of her composure, shewing her face once more, and seeming to shake off despair with an impatient toss of the head and to confront the future bravely. Mr Bailey found himself close at her side, ready, not to say eager, to support her in his embrace should she shew signs of fainting or faltering or giving any other suitable feminine expression to her emotions. His attitude struck a nice balance between ardour and respect, compassion and self-approval. It was as if he said: 'Here is my shoulder. I do not ask you to lean upon it, but here it is, and very ready to be made use of. My faithful heart beats only for you. My not unmanly bosom asks nothing better than that your head, if it so please you, should rest gracefully and confidingly upon it. My arms, which are all discretion and politeness, can be trusted to support your enchanting person—should the occasion arise—without affront to your invincible modesty.' The lady seemed aware of this devotion, and sweetly, sadly, grateful for it. She answered his eloquent silence with something between a sigh and a smile. But again she moved out of reach and was

marvellously at once near and inaccessible.

'I find, sir, you are a gentleman,' she said, sketching a curtsy. 'Indeed I had guessed as much long since; and the discretion of your behaviour and the refinement of your conversation do but confirm that earlier conjecture. What whim it is that persuades you to play your present part of innkeeper I do not know and have no title to inquire . . .'

'The whim, madam,' he cried, almost saucily, 'of providing myself and my family with the means of life. A prejudice in favour of food and drink and a roof over my head. 'Tis true that I have seen happier fortunes, but none happier than to avow myself your devoted slave.'

He was a man translated and triumphant, and his choice of words was significant of that triumph. 'Servant,' from such as he, whose gentility was in question even while it was being affirmed, might have passed as obsequious; whereas 'slave' was ardent, gallant, a confident claim, a proud boast. This was indeed the most arrogant speech he had ever uttered in his life, and her fluttering reception of it made of him such a tremendous fellow, and of her a thing so small and fragile, so exquisite and lovely and forlorn, that he was hard put to it not to break the bounds of discretion and take her at once into his arms. But that were to risk all, and to risk it too soon. He had still sense enough to remember that. It was incredible that so high a goddess could stoop to him and suffer his embrace even for a moment. Moreover, he was already sufficiently exalted, and

perhaps half knew it. In not attempting her he felt humble, and found humility delicious ; chivalrous, and enjoyed his chivalry ; politic, and knew his policy a safe one. And there remained, after all, his natural curiosity to be satisfied. His guest, the lady's escort, had run off without paying the reckoning. A trifle, no doubt, compared with the measure of this golden hour : but a curious trifle none the less.

‘ You are too kind, sir,’ said she. ‘ I am happy to know I may trust your discretion. For trust you I must, and with a secret.’

At the word secret, the light in Mr Bailey's eye burned more brightly still.

‘ I am no better than other men,’ said he : and at least half sincerely, though the other half of him could not but suspect that by his very statement he proved the contrary. ‘ I am no better than other men, madam. But I would sooner die than betray a secret confided to me by such lips as yours.’

There was urgency in her manner. She came nearer to him and said, with lowered voice : ‘ This is no time for fine speeches. I am afraid for my brother. Ask me no details, my friend, but give me leave to rely on your discretion and goodwill. A grave danger threatens my brother, and his danger is necessarily mine. We have enemies. We are reduced in fortune. Persecution has dogged us these last five years—ever since the ill-starred adventure of '45. Believe me, my kind friend, we are no less loyal than honest. But malice pursues us.

My brother at this moment is engaged on a most delicate mission. He does not tell me all, and it is best that you know nothing. I am distressed by this sudden flight of his. I wonder indeed that he should have left my side with no word of warning or explanation. I have not deserved it of him.'

The quality of her voice was subtly changing: a note of anger, almost a note of hatred, could be heard in it. A sudden and devastating doubt assailed Mr Bailey.

'Your side, madam? Left your side without forewarning you?'

The lady flushed. 'Indeed yes. A very uncivil performance. But for hearing his door slam and the sound of his footsteps descending the stair, I should have known nothing of his movements.'

'Are you sure it was he? May he not be still in his room . . . unless,' said Mr Bailey casually, 'you have already satisfied yourself to the contrary?'

'Indeed, sir, I wonder at you. How is there room for question, since you yourself saw him go?' She stared. 'Is it possible that you doubt me?'

She looked, to Mr Bailey's eyes, so lovely in her indignation that he was fired anew. 'Madam, I am yours to command. As for doubting you, I would sooner doubt myself. You are in all things perfection.' He impetuously seized her hand. 'You are an angel. You are——'

She turned away from him. 'Could I think you sincere,' she said, in a low voice, 'I would ask you to say nothing of my brother's strange departure. Or

rather to contrive some story that should make it appear less strange. If I could persuade myself that you mean even the half of what you profess, I could bear this affliction with some show of patience, and remain here, under your roof, until my brother's return. But no, I am friendless and forsaken, and I must go from here at daybreak.'

'What have I done,' cried Mr Bailey, 'how have I offended you that you can speak so cruelly of leaving my house before you must?'

She softened. She was manifestly touched. 'Do you then wish me to stay, my poor friend?'

Her eyes dazzled him. He now possessed both her hands and stooped to kiss them. 'With all my heart,' he said.

A light hand stroked his hair; a word, softly spoken, caressed him. Then he was alone in the room, and the clock began striking three.

CHAPTER 5

THE LISTENERS : AND WHAT ELSE THEY HEARD THAN THE SOUND OF HORSES' HOOVES

FOR a man bent on making a secret departure our gentleman in the three-cornered hat must be accounted unlucky, for at least three pairs of ears, besides those of the landlord and the deserted lady, listened to the sound of his vanishing horses. Mr Bailey's daughter, for one, had needed no waking. She had lain for an hour or more listening to her own heart-beats, and feeling at intervals her child stirring in the womb, before the noise of footsteps tiptoeing past her door recalled her to a sense of where she was. The moment before, her thoughts had been with her dark slim honey-tongued lover: that romantic creature who looked, they said, like a gipsy, but could talk (whispered her heart) like a prince in a fairy-tale. She was remembering an August evening when she had wandered across Dyking Common into that fairy-tale. She saw him in the near distance driving his geese into their pen. He waved to her and waited. And it was this attitude of waiting that piqued her curiosity. There was no impudence in it: there was only a quiet satisfaction, as though they were already old friends and this a planned meeting. Nor did he approach her: that would

have sent her running. He stood and smiled a welcome, and she from a little distance watched him with wide eyes. So this was the famous Gipsy Noke. She had seen him many a time in the street, but here he was different, here he was curiously a part of nature : and the best part. The bright grass, the trees, the bending blue sky : these seemed his natural setting : he was their comrade and their equal. She turned her gaze to the ground and sauntered slowly by, afraid lest he should pursue her, yet loth to leave him. She was not quite unintelligent, but her intelligence now was quiescent. Her behaviour was all but involuntary, for her mind formed no image of what she feared or of what she wanted. Two instincts working in her, a dumb fear and a dumb desire, she was deaf to the small, lisping, infant voice of reason. Her feet brought her to a standstill ; her head turned ; her eyes looked. The man's dark eyes were still watching her. He smiled and called : ' Come and lend a hand with these geese, missy, wilta now ? ' He needed no help, but she went to him without further hesitation. ' I pen they in for why ? ' said Noke, serenely at his ease. ' Because there be handy folk about, that's for why, my dear. I pen they in, so there'll be a squawken if em's tampered with.' He smiled at her. His eyes were bright with geniality and excitement. His speech fascinated her. She had never met anyone so queerly attractive. ' You're not of these parts, are you ? ' she said shyly. ' Nay,' he answered, with a hint of teasing, ' I be the King of

Ameriky. They do call me a gipsy hereabouts. But you'll call me Harry, wilta now, seeing we be friends, my pretty ?' She was too much excited to answer : the dark warmth of his glance made her tingle, mind and body. 'You be Mus Bailey's girl, bainta ?' She nodded. 'Ah,' said he, 'come you into my cot, darlen, and see where I do live.' He held out a hand to her. She was suddenly afraid, and wanted to run away. But she wanted, too, to stay. And she stayed. She was a true daughter of Wooma, and he a true son of Koor ; but the centuries had taught the man more than the woman. He knew whither they were both tending : she knew nothing but a consciousness of delicious danger. And now her ignorance was half-wilful : she shut out thought, and drifted on the tide of an agelong impulse. Agelong, primitive, but not simple : an impulse, baffling in its complexity, whose direction we see but whose nature is not to be encompassed by any man's definition, whether mystic or moralist or man of science. The biologist will draw you a map of its behaviour ; the psychologist will explore its ramifications ; the poet will find in the mystery the beauty and meaning he himself has put there. And it may be that the poet, who has the last word, had also the first ; and that the word became flesh ; and that flesh is the hieroglyphic of a mind in labour. 'Come in now,' said Harry Noke ; and his hand, strong and persuasive, closed on hers. She struggled to free herself, but he only laughed, and she quickly gave up the struggle. She shrank from entering the

cot, but she entered it willingly, and even, despite her dragging feet, eagerly. The place enchanted her: both its outward and inward aspects were a surprise and a delight. It was a one-roomed shanty built round the trunk of a great oak. It had an uneven boarded floor, raised from the ground (said its maker proudly) by large stones. On the tree-trunk, which was the centre and support of the whole structure, hung various kitchen utensils: a frying-pan, a saucepan, a kettle, and a pint jug. Outside, surrounding the whole, a ditch had been dug; and the site was a good one—the flat summit of a small natural eminence. At their entry, a large lean dog came bounding from his corner to greet them, and a voice said: ‘Pretty fellow!’ Noke’s parrot could say no more than that, but two well-chosen words can give a man perennial satisfaction. Letitia was startled, and her hand involuntarily clung to the fingers enclosing it. ‘Oh, it’s only a parrot,’ she said. ‘What a beauty!’ The place was warm and dim and filled with a strong smell of hay. ‘And so be you, my blossom,’ answered the prince of this darkness. His arm came round her. ‘You be a rare body of beauty, Tisha Bailey.’ She had been told substantially the same not seldom before, but never had the flattery seemed so sweet, nor induced in her so wild a hunger for more. In the past, a few light kisses had been all her knowledge of love; but now, body and soul, she felt herself burning, melting, liquefying, until she was all responsiveness. . . . This she had been remembering, and much more, as

she lay and tossed in her bed and waited for sleep to visit her with quietness : how his eyes had shone in the darkness, how his hands had stroked her face, and how shy she had been of the dog's presence, till the soft golden rain of her lover's talk fell on her naked bosom and flooded her heart. This she had been remembering when that sound roused her from reverie : footsteps going past her door and descending the stairs, and then, after an interval tense with listening, the sound of horses. I wonder who that can be ? Is anyone ill ?'

Jenny Mykelborne, a stone's throw away, was asking the same question ; for death ran in her mind tonight, a message having come from Maiden Holt that her father was to attend in the morning to measure Paul Dewdney for a coffin. She was reflecting on the chance of there being something already in stock that would do. For the wheelwright's workshop generally contained at least one coffin of a likely size, Mykelborne's first concern being, when one funeral was over, to begin making ready for another. ' 'Tis martial folly to be took unawares,' he said. ' There be no manner of sense in that, my dearies.' And while at work on the new coffin he would busy his mind with wondering who was most likely to occupy it : whether Gaffer This or Gammer That, or poor Sally Byfoot as had been these ten years abed poor soul, or yon fellow that fell sick a-Saturday. Without levity, and in his own sober and godly fashion, he would make bets on this matter, as it were with Death himself ; and when his

candidate was chosen he would greet the event with a suitable mingling of melancholy and triumph. 'Deary me now, so he's gone at last, poor soul. Now mark my words and whaddid I tella. All flesh is grass, I telled a, and tis old Roger as'll stretch his length in you, I said, giving coffin a tap with my hammer. All flesh is grass, to be sure, as Postle Paul well knowed.' But Death was more than his match and full of surprises, and as often as not outwitted him by passing over the gaffers and gammers, and never coming near the Sally Byfoots ; for the green springing corn is as much to his fancy as the ripe grain or the rotten. To Jenny a coffin was a homely and familiar thing : as a child she had put her dolls to bed in it, and played at dinner-parties on the lid. Coffins meant nothing, and death meant very little. At nineteen she was immortal. Nor was she unwilling to share the sweet taste of her immortality with such of the village men as took her fancy. She was big and fair and sentimental, with the bold shy staring eyes of a child, a plump maturity of figure, and lips that were a perpetual invitation. Nothing so much surprised her as to be kissed, and her capacity for enjoying such surprises was inexhaustible. So her thoughts, though tonight they began with Paul Dewdney's death and the coffin that her father must provide, did not long rest there, but went following the stranger and his horses down the Dyking road.

It was a slightly different sound that Noke heard, five or six minutes later ; for the horses now trod on

soft grass. It was so unusual for him to hear a passer-by at this time of night that he sat up in bed and listened. The traveller was very near: Noke judged him to be within five yards of the cot itself. He was apparently having trouble with his horses, for suddenly a volley of ferocious oaths broke the quiet of the night with an ugliness like that of murder. The fellow, whoever he was, seemed to be devil-possessed. Pricked by curiosity, and with his blood stirred to an answering tumult by the tumult outside, Noke scrambled off his bed and dressed quickly. He fancied he might be too late (he did not ask for what), but it was against his instinct to go in quest of adventure unbreeched. Anger raged round his house, now near, now less near: the brief thunder of hooves, the vile shouting of a man. What gutter-scum is there, thought Noke; for in the course of a life not over-gentle, even by the standard of the times, he had never heard a voice so cruel as this stranger's. And now, having pulled on his boots, he was ready to go and see what was amiss. He opened the door and looked out upon a moonlit scene. At the moment the disturbers of his peace were not in sight, but he could hear them at his back, and the next moment they appeared: two prancing horses, with a man clinging to the back of one of them. The man was a masterful rider and was in no personal danger; but something had terrified the horses, perhaps he himself, and of the second, which he held by the bridle, he had lost command. Nor did his anger avail him, for at that very moment the

animal broke away from him, and the one he bestrode began rearing and plunging anew. In the same instant a dog ran barking towards them. 'Back, Roger! Here, Roger!' shouted Noke, but the voice of the stranger drowned his. The fellow was now grinning with rage. Controlling his horse he stared down at the barking dog with a kind of glee. The next instant there was a pistol in his hand. He took careless aim and fired. The dog barked no more. The horse became frenzied. Noke knelt in the grass at Roger's side. But not for many seconds : the dog was already quite dead. His master jumped up, uttered an inarticulate noise that was half sob half curse, and rushed towards the stranger. The horseman yelled at him to keep back. 'Out the way, blast ye! Or I'll serve you same as him' He struck out with the butt end of his pistol, but Noke, with a wolfish noise, dodged the blow, ran in, and seized him by the leg. The leg kicked him in the face and was free, but he seized it again, and gave a twist and a jerk and a heave, and the horse bolted, leaving its master lying limp in the grass. Noke, snorting and quivering, stood for a moment blinded by his own blood. It sealed his eyes, and he could feel the warm salt of it on his tongue. But presently he was able to look down at his work. The stranger had fallen on his head. The neck was broken, and in his dying convulsion he had flung himself backwards and now lay staring at the moon. His hat and wig had fallen off; his head was bald, his face vilely distorted, the face of a man who had died by violence

and in anger. Noke thought him a mighty ugly customer, but he tried to suppress the thought. He had hated this fellow a moment ago : now that he was dead he feared him. Looking down on him he gulped a kind of prayer ; glanced guiltily round ; and then found himself afraid to confront that face again. Averting his gaze, fixing it not on the face but on the boots of the dead man, he tried a kind of argument. A nasty business, but you did kill my dog after all. No good looking at me like that : I'm not afeared of you, alive *or* dead. Still I'm sorry it happened. Mistakes on both sides, but you *did* kill my dog. Thur wornt no call to do that. Now worthur ? So his thoughts ended, on a note almost of appeal. He invited his enemy to take a reasonable view of the matter. He was in dread of being haunted.

The dread pursued him to his cot. He went in and shut the door, leaving the two corpses, the dog and the man, untouched where they had fallen. He was not a religious man, but he knew a bad omen when he saw one, and the way that protruding tongue had pointed at him could bode no good. And what had he done—was it murder ? Well, they could prove nothing against him. A man falls from his horse and breaks his neck. Whose fault is that ? Not Harry Noke's, gipsy or no gipsy. He was less afraid of the law than of the unseen power whose business it was to visit a man's sins upon him, and by many degrees less afraid of the law than of the corpse. For to the law, murder was no worse than

theft: the same punishment served for either. Moreover the law could be outwitted, but there was no outwitting the Almighty, and no deceiving that corpse. A powerful sly corpse he made, did that one, an uncommon nasty figure of a corpse, with a sorta sneer or snarl in's face, and a look of Now I've got you. Noke lay on his bed, sweating and cold, fearing nothing tangible, wishing almost for something tangible to fear. He had never in his life lacked animal courage, but now he was at a loss and wanted comfort. His thoughts turned gratefully to woman. He remembered how dearly Tisha Bailey loved him, and what a smooth soft complaisant bedfellow Jenny Mykelborne made; and he wished he were not alone in this cold quiet night. Mere habit, and the prompting of loneliness, brought the name of Roger to his lips—'Hey Roger! Good old son!'—before he remembered the impossible truth about that familiar friend and housemate. He was alone, with only his thoughts for company—his thoughts and the ghost they conjured into being. Yet not quite alone, for his involuntary murmur evoked a response from the darkness.

'Pretty fellow! Pretty fellow!'

The parrot was never at a loss: he always knew the right thing to say.

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CHAPTER 6

A VISITOR FOR MR BAILEY AND OF THE CARGO HE CARRIED

THREE o'clock. For a moment Mr Bailey stared at the face of his monitor as though its announcement of the hour had been addressed to him personally. But if the thought of bed had been repugnant before the lady's visit, it was now doubly so. To sneak timidly upstairs and contrive to slip between the sheets without waking the wife who shared them would provide this romantic night with just the anticlimax he most dreaded ; whereas by remaining where he was, in a room enchanted by memory, he could luxuriate in the sense of a continuing rapture. The lady had left the scent and savour of her femininity behind her ; the benches, the shuttered windows, the worn brick floor, all were in some fashion transfigured by the light she had shed upon them ; and the air still held for him echoes of her voice. Moreover there was here a fire burning, and capable of being coaxed into a blaze : a consideration not to be neglected on so cold a night by no matter how elated a man. Mr Bailey, with a sigh that was more than half satisfaction, went to the hearth and tended the fire lovingly. He set to work with the bellows and was soon rewarded. Here was a vital

symbol of the high dream that consumed him : his few faggots burned bravely on the hearth, aspiring to the stars. And the distance between the one and the other was scarcely vaster than that which separated his present status from the beatitude he fancied he desired. Therein, it may be, lay his salvation ; but Mr Bailey himself did not take that view, and would have rejected it with indignation had it been presented to him. For all that, and despite his sighing, he was as nearly contented as your true Romantic can ever be ; and after a little while of musing and wishing, lamenting and exulting, he took up his tablets again and began adding verse to verse :

*Yet stay ! For how could such an one as he,
Or be he duty-bound or be he free,
Dare to pollute her person with a touch !
It were presumption e'en to think of such.
Let Inclination hide its impious head,
And chaste Respect be evident instead,
Devotion grow and Admiration swell,
And fond Ambition hearken to his knell.
Let not thy thoughts pursue connubial bliss ;
Take counsel rather and remember this :
Though in her veins Consideration flow,
Her bosom, Bailey, is as chaste as snow.
As well her words, as her corporeal parts,
Serve not to soothe, but to unsettle, hearts.
For Woman, Bailey, was by Heav'n design'd
To be the dear tormentor of Mankind.*

With this piece of self-admonition he had perforce to content himself. Drowsiness was stealing over him, and he could do no more. He had just enough energy left to consider his situation, briefly and finally, in its immediate and practical aspect. He resolved to have done, once and for all, with this nonsensical notion of going to bed. He would make a night of it down here in the warmth of the inn parlour, and when his wife came in the morning and found him he would tell her that he had risen early from her side and left her sleeping. She would perhaps not believe him; she would perhaps hale him upstairs and point accusingly at the undented pillow; she would perhaps upbraid him. But he was too wretched, too happy, above all too sleepy, to care very much what she said or did, poor stupid woman: for once he would please himself, let her say what she might. He fetched a couple of cushions from the other room, arranged them on the settle, and pillowed his head snugly. And was soon asleep.

He woke with a start an hour or so later, fancying he had heard a tapping at the door. He felt stiff and cold and unrefreshed. He rubbed his head vigorously, and yawned. And now there was certainly a knock at the door. So it was no fancy after all, he said to himself. There's someone outside, and I must go see who tis. 'A queer time for paying calls,' he grumbled, with a glance at the clock. He heaved himself off the seat and padded in his stocking'd feet half way across the brick floor.

There he stopped, to yawn again, and to toy with a vague hope that the visitor had got tired of waiting and had gone away. Although it was within half an hour of the family's time for rising, he was suspicious and resentful of anyone who could come knocking at his door when all honest folk, as he told himself, were safe and sound in bed. His mood was exceedingly moral this morning, and he did not at all approve of the irregular life. But the visitor had by no means gone away : he rattled the door furiously and drummed upon it with his clenched fists. ' Now bless my soul,' said Mr Bailey, staring cantankerously at the door, ' what a to-do upon my word ! You'd think murder was done by the way that fellow be buffeting the door. Haply tis my fine gentleman come back to pay his reckoning.' Being in no mood for fine gentlemen, being in no mood for anything but food and drink and a warm bed, he made no further move towards the door, but stood rubbing the sleep from his eyes, and yawning prodigiously, and reflecting on the vanity of human wishes. When the knocking began again he resumed his grumbling. ' What right or title has he to be let in ? Tell me that,' he demanded of himself. ' He went out of his own will and accord, didn't he ? Very well then. Let him stay out.

*The guest that leaves my house without farewell
Shall learn his manners when . . . when . . .*

when he comes back. Hold your noise, you dirty

scamp, while I finish my couplet.

*The man that thinks to treat me as a fool.
Shall learn his manners in a bitter school.*

Weak, Bailey. Very weak, my friend. Try again.

*Whoso shall play the rascal in my house
I count him little better than a louse.*

Oh, a pox take the rhymes ! And a pox take you !' he added heartily, with his hand on the bolt. ' This is no time to drag a man out of his bed.' He opened the door. ' And what—oh, so tis you, Harry Noke ? You're up betimes this morning. What's amiss with your face, man ? Tis an ugly bruise, that.'

The clock had proclaimed it to be morning-time, but as yet it was a morning darker than the night it had displaced : dark with a kind of drifting darkness, and cold with a coldness that lacked the splendour of moon and stars to give it spirit. The street had a ghostly air, and Noke, standing whey-faced on the threshold, looked like the last forlorn survivor in a country of the dead. The sound of munching drew Mr Bailey's eyes to where, at a couple of yards distance, stood a horse and cart.

Receiving no answer from his visitor, the landlord repeated his remark, adding : ' Marketing already ? But that's a rare ugly bruise you've found for yourself. Who's been fighting ye ?'

‘Horse’ll be all right,’ said Noke, stepping into the house without waiting for an invitation. ‘I’ve putten the nosebag on un.’

‘I heartily wish you might put one on me, Harry Noke,’ said Mr Bailey bitterly, as he lit the candles. The thought of a horse filling itself with good corn while he himself still fasted was almost more than he could bear. But he was glad of Noke’s company, and obscurely comforted by the sound of his voice, which seemed the only friendly thing in a bleak universe. ‘Now you’re here, neighbour, we’ll have bite and sup together if so be you’re agreeable. I’ve been waking the night through, and fasting to boot. So what d’you say?’

‘God bless the giver, say I,’ answered Noke. ‘I be empty as a drum, and that’s gospel, Mus Bailey. What’s more, I took and had a nasty fall smarnen. That be how I got this face on me. A pesty stump of tree twas, and me a trifle consarned in drink.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Bailey, nodding wisely, ‘and that’ll be why you’re not feeling yourself this morning. Now do you try kindling the fire, willee, while I go find food for us.’

‘There be a spark or two left still twinklen,’ remarked Noke, setting about his task at once. ‘Bythen you’re back twill be pretty-sure crackling.’ He was as good as his word, for by the time Mr Bailey returned with bread and boiled bacon on a tray he had coaxed the few sparks into a small blaze and added a handful of brushwood from the pile at

the hearthside. He stared hungrily at the crackling brightness, and stretched out his hands to it as though he would gather it into himself and be warmed for ever. 'A tarrible heartening sight is a fire on the hearth,' he remarked with relish. 'I've never breathed a day so raw as this day.'

'Well, I wouldn't say that,' said Mr Bailey, already more cheerful. 'It's dark enough yet, and chill. But there's no poisonous dank in it same as I've known in my time.'

Noke shivered. 'Dank enough, Mus Bailey. It do rot a man's bones in the rathe of morning, when there baint no wink of light, and you can hear the unfroze gobs of dew dripping from the branches on the roof of your house. It plenty do rot a man's bones.'

'Ah,' said Mr Bailey, who had the knack, when he chose, of suiting his diction to his company, 'I see what it is. You're feeling a bit low in yourself. I can see that with half an eye. Does it give you much pain, that face of yours? Ah, I'll 'low it does. You want a wife to keep you comforted. 'Tis lonely of a cold dark morning in that little house of yours, I rackon. Come, fall to, man, and get a bit of this fine fat bacon inside yourself. There's nothing like it to drive away melancholy. Yes, tis a wife you need. A hearty wench that ud keep you warm of nights and make you so cross and crusty in the morning, with her chatter and her rattle and her hurry-skurry manners, or else with her lazy sluggabed doings and devices, for tis one or tother: she'd make you so

cross and crusty, I say, that you'd never have time for sighing or sadness till you was downstairs safe and sound with your breakfast in your belly. . . . Take a drop of small ale with that bacon, my friend. You'll find they go lovingly together.'

'Ay,' agreed Noke, with his mouth full, 'there be no beverage to beat ut for breakfast. A man,' he explained, as if for the benefit of an uninstructed audience, 'daun't want a heavy lumpish liquor to wash down his breakfast with. Do he now?' He seemed to implore this hypothetical audience to use its commonsense and be reasonable. 'Stands to sense, Mus Bailey, that what a man do want is a spry thinnish liquor with a kindly smatch of bitterness to un, bainta now? As for wenches,' he added, after a pause for munching, 'dear knows there's a plenty wenches'll come for the asken without bit or bridle or wedden-ring nuther.' He spoke not vaingloriously nor with evident pride, but rather in the tone of his former melancholy. 'And there be naught that goo better with a drop of small ale, master, than a collop of bacon the like of this. And fat bacon too. There be virtue and goodness in fat. Fat do travel the body and oil the innards and keep a man's sperrit burnen bright. Lean daun't. A waste of good time be lean. Three pun of bacon off the thick end: the thick end, minda. That's what I do goo for in the market when I've means enough to pay for un.'

'And is that,' asked Mr Bailey, 'what you're off to fetch today at five o'clock of the morning? What brings you out so early, man? If you asked me, I'd

say you ought to put a bit of something on that nose of yours, Harry. I've never seen a nastier bruise than that.'

'I've brought you news,' said Noke. 'Ay, and something besides. Gogzoons, I've had a tarrible queer night of it. A man needs a collop of bacon after such a night, and I'm much beholden, Mus Bailey, and I looks t'ards you.'

'Well, what's your news?' asked Mr Bailey cheerfully. 'Since it got you out of bed so early you've been a long time coming to it.'

'Bad news'll keep, I rackon.' Noke, stopping in mid-munch, filled the unoccupied half of his mouth with ale before resuming speech. 'You had a strange pair of folkse come last night, didn't ye now?'

Mr Bailey nodded. His eyes shone with sudden interest.

'A man,' said Noke deliberately, 'and a woman with him.'

'A young lady,' amended Mr Bailey.

'That's as may be,' said Noke. 'Woman or young lady, tis all one on Doomsday, bainta? Now last night, Mus Bailey, that same man or gennelman do come prancing along my common with a brace of nags.' He paused, to watch the effect of his words. 'Mark that.'

Mr Bailey could not control his impatience. 'So that's how tis. Tell me. This is mighty important. Where is he now, d'you 'low?'

'I 'low naught,' answered Noke. 'I knows,'

He jerked a thumb towards the street. 'He be outside.'

'Outside!' The landlord jumped to his feet.

'Ay, outside in the street. I brought him along in my cart. Now——'

Mr Bailey was too deeply agitated to wait for explanations. 'Now God bless my soul, I did the gentleman an injustice. How delighted the young lady his sister will be!' He was suddenly full of fussy hospitality, so eager that he did not know which way to turn but could only stand hesitating and twittering. 'And in your cart, you say, and us sitting here gossiping. God bless my soul, the gentleman will be wanting his breakfast.'

'Nay,' said Noke, 'he'll want no breakfast. He've had all the breakfast he can want. Besides, he can't eat no breakfast, with his neck broke the way it is. Could you now?'

'Broken his neck!' stammered Mr. Bailey. 'D'you mean . . .'

'Ay, indeed a has. Fell off his horse a did, and snap!—twas the end of breakfasts for him, Mus Bailey. And suppers too, I shoon't wonder. And now he do lie quiet and cold under a cover of sacking. And the harse that throwed un be tied up at home, ready for them as claims un.'

'But——' Mr Bailey had not yet come to the end of his astonishment: sudden death compelled from him the customary tribute of wonder. 'But I saw him myself only last night. With my own eyes I saw him, as hale and brisk a gentleman as you please.

And now, you tell me, he's dead and gone. I can't believe it, Harry Noke. What a shocking affair, to be sure. I can't believe it. And you saw him fall, did you? How came it to happen, and what in the name of goodness and mercy are we to do with him now?' He glanced nervously towards the street. 'And him in that cart of yours! What's to be done? We can't leave him lying there as though he was no more than a dead dog.'

Harry Noke winced at these words, and made an ugly wry grimace. 'Do you bring un in, Mus Bailey, if you do feel so nice about ut. Gogzoons, that's because why I brung un along, bainta? Bring un in and set un up on the bench and ask un how ut did chance.' After a moody silence he went on in a milder tone: 'Better goo and take a look at un. You'll find un lying snug enough, and all his gear with him. Hat and wig and saddlebags and all: just as I found 'em. He be a quiet enough carpse: I'll say that. But he've a look in his eyes I've never seen the like of, nor doon't wanta.'

'I'll not have him in here unless I must,' said Mr Bailey. 'Twould bring nothing but bad luck, and twould frighten that poor dear young lady into ten thousand vapours to find she'd got a dead body for a brother.'

Noke's voice became thick and quick with urgency and dread. 'That be no way to talk, Mus Bailey. The carpse took a room in your house, didn't a, and so there he must lie. 'Tis no carpse of mine, so why should I be moidered with un? If ut

baint your consarn, ut be the young woman's. And if ut baint hers, ut be Richard Mykelborne the coffin-maker's.'

But the landlord had made up his mind. He spoke with decision. 'Now hearken to me, Harry Noke. This is a matter for Squire Marden. He's a gentleman and a magistrate, and what happens amiss in this Fee is for him to weigh and consider. Coroner's inquest they do call it. I'm nothing but an innkeeper: Squire's the man for you. Squire's the man to say who tis, and why tis, and all about it. And if you want to find a home for that poor corpse, Harry Noke, and not have it by you for the rest of your born days, you'll take counsel of me and drive away off to Squire Marden's with it this very minute.'

There was force in this contention, and Mr Bailey's persuasiveness proved irresistible. In his eagerness to be rid of Harry Noke, and of the responsibility the fellow sought to thrust upon him, he seized his arm and all but led him to the door. To the door but no further. One glance shewed him a street from which the darkness was lifting, a sky grown paler; and he turned quickly back into the room, his heart eased and comforted by the crunch and creak and rumble of the departing wagon. He addressed himself busily to the day's work: unfastened the shutters, extinguished the candles, began sweeping the floor vigorously.

A step on the stairs disturbed him in the midst of these activities, and frightened him into wondering what he must tell the young lady. He was in no

mind to be caught by her with a broom in his hand : an attitude much at variance with his notion of what was loverlike and gallant and genteel. Nor did he wish to be seen in his unwashed unshaven state by one to whom he had dedicated his life and soul. He was aware of having slept in his clothes, and felt incapable of sustaining a conversation upon the giddy heights he had reached last night with his charmer. Moreover he was a humane man, and dreaded the pain he must inflict on her by his tragic news. Already his attitude had insensibly changed. Exquisite and ravishing she still was, in his thoughts, but these things came second : she was now, first of all, a bereaved woman, and, by virtue of her bereavement, a child claiming protection. This was a sobering thought bringing many small anxieties in its train. His admiration was sincere ; his devotion, he assured himself, was profound ; but, when it came to protection, he could not shut his eyes to difficulties. He cast the broom from him, struggled back into his jacket, and assumed a selfconscious pose. All this, these thoughts and movements, occupied no more than a second or two. The next moment the stiffness of his attitude relaxed. He picked up the broom and resumed his sweeping. The footsteps drew nearer, and without alarming him, for he now knew that they were not those of the fair stranger. Yes, there were difficulties in the way of his offering protection to chance young women in trouble ; and the chief of them, as his ears told him, was at this moment descending the stairs.

CHAPTER 7

A WEEK LATER : THE ROAD TO UPCHURCH : AND WHAT PASSED BETWEEN JACK MARDEN AND A BEREAVED WOMAN

TWENTY-FIVE miles south of Marden Fee, and within an hour's slow ride of the coast, stands the little town of Featherham. So it is spelt by pedantic and official persons, in church registers and the like ; but most of us, in this mid-eighteenth century, are content to write it (if we write at all) as we speak it : Fedrum. It is a mellow and friendly town, very small and compact, very clean and bright. Its High Street is cobbled ; its half-timbered houses lean across to each other like gossiping cronies ; its church is ancient. But the general effect is one not of age but of a timeless perfection, something neither ancient nor modern but at once fresh and mature like this January morning. In Fedrum the sun shines more brightly than elsewhere ; rain falls like a benediction ; an east wind is the kind of foe that a man of spirit is glad to cross swords with ; snow is a wonder, and frost a tingling delight. Here nothing can happen, whether fair or foul, but its beauty is enhanced, or its foulness redeemed, by the kindness and candour and quiet self-assurance that seem to pervade the very air. The quintessence

of this genius loci is to be found in the white house that stands, surrounded by a high-walled garden, in the middle of the town. It is but twenty years old and built in the best modern style, though already, being of Fedrum, it is mellow in quality as well as serene and sensible in design ; and it has recently become the residence of Dr Humphrey and his daughter. This last circumstance is a matter of no little interest to Jack Marden, whom we now see riding towards Fedrum in the company of the bereaved young woman who played such havoc in Mr Bailey's breast a week ago. For she, it appears, has friends in Upchurch ; and Upchurch lies but a few miles to the east of Fedrum. . . .

And now, for the hundredth time in a few hours, that young woman broke the silence, snapped the golden thread of Marden's thought, by her expressions of gratitude. She was vastly obliged for his civility, she was greatly beholden for the protection of his escort, she trembled to think what might have happened had he not so befriended her, and she wished it might be in her power to repay his kindness. Here she fetched a deep sigh, and flashed an almost tender glance at him, and, being caught in this act, was covered with a pretty blushing confusion. He had already taken her measure, and found it widely at variance with the measure of her pretensions. She owed him more than she knew : she owed him, indeed, that for which she was thanking her own cleverness, her liberty. But her provocativeness piqued him into taking a momentary interest in her

person, which he now observed to be by no means lacking in feminine attractiveness. He knew her, or thought he knew her, for trash. An easy woman, he said to himself, mine for the asking, or any man's. And there was nothing here, he told himself, to stir a man's soul. But the soul can take care of itself: one need not always be exercising it. Nor need one, thought he, disdain an adventure merely because the soul is not engaged in it; for though he was a boy at heart, with a boy's shy adoration of the beauty that is beyond sense, he was also a man and a man of his times: profoundly curious and questing, not uninfluenced by a tradition of gallantry, and no more disposed than the next man to ignore a woman's challenge. In a word, he might, at any other time, have risen to the bait of that wistful sigh, that downcast look. But now he was triple-armed against such an assault: she was easy, she was of dubious honesty, and, above all, his mind as well as his heart was already crowded with another. His thoughts were all with Celia Humphrey, whom, as he hoped, he was soon to see again. For two days his heart had been beating with that hope, and a resolution was forming in him to put his fortune to the test as soon as might be. Reacting from the misery of the past week, he felt a new zest filling him. With Paul buried, he turned instinctively away from the dark thoughts that had oppressed him. The idea of death, the sharp reminder of his own mortality, set him hotfoot in quest of the more abundant life that only Celia, he vowed, could give

him, if she but would ; and his imagination glowed with the wonder of her. Hitherto he had hardly dared to do more than toy with the idea of winning her : he could not conceive that she, so perfect, and so securely and quietly in possession of herself, could ever come within reach of so ordinary a fellow as he. What have I to offer, he asked himself? And the answer was discouraging. His fortune was small ; he was not dashing or witty ; his prowess in the hunting field was nothing above the ordinary ; he was comparatively untravelled ; and there was nothing in his appearance that could make a woman look twice at him. Finally, though it counted in his favour that he professed her religious faith, it must tell against him that she was devout and he too desperately honest to conceal his indifference. He could find, indeed, no cause for hope, and no excuse for engaging in an enterprise manifestly impossible of success. But hope he did : or rather, giving rein to his wishes and leaving his reasons to limp along as best they could, he moved forward impetuously at last, neither stopping to consider his chances nor deterred by his lack of any personal merit. He felt joyous and ardent and irresistible, for an instinct wiser than reason told him that only by so feeling, in despite of logic, could he win his heart's desire. The time for humility was not yet : courage, even a reckless courage, must come first. He, more than most men, needed this prompting of the blood ; for by nature and habit, and by the circumstances of his childhood,

he was lonely, and self-mistrustful, and proud with the pride of a heart so hungry for love, so eager to escape its prison of isolation, that it shrinks from the exposure involved in offering itself. But, today, spring was in his blood, though there was nothing but January frost and January sunlight in the air about him. As he rode through rural England, crossing commons and skirting severals, his gaze travelled lightly over the hedgeless fields ; ribbons of cultivation shewing green spears or brown furrows ; wooded hills ; cattle at grass ; small lanky lambs capering after their mothers. But these sights did not for a moment interrupt or blur his vision of Celia Humphrey. All that they possessed of beauty was somehow translated into terms of her. In his mind's eye he saw her as he had seen her some three months ago : slim and brown, cool and friendly, very much mistress of herself and serenely unaware of being also mistress of him. Because she was town-bred he was very ready to feel himself something of a bumpkin in her presence, for his own excursions to the metropolis had taken him to the resorts of men, and of women indeed, but not of gentlewomen. There were memories in him that he would gladly have been rid of ; and never more gladly than now, when he was riding into the presence of a being so far removed from that world of trivial desperate dissipations with which a lonely and obscurely frustrated man may sometimes seek to solace himself. But her urban antecedents did not dismay him as they might have done, for by

adoption she was already heart and soul a country-woman. She sat a horse bravely; took pleasure in the conversation of her humbler neighbours; humorously prided herself on being weather-wise; managed her rustic servants with discretion; and was a welcome and familiar figure in the streets of Fedrum. Of her inner mind he knew little enough, and so had the more scope for delighted and ardent conjecture. She had read a book or two; she could talk intelligently, as well as worshipfully, of David Garrick; she sang enchantingly in French, in Italian, and even in English, accompanying herself on her grandmother's harpsichord. Her dark eyes looked upon the world with neither arrogance nor timidity. This he knew: the rest was mystery. What she could give a lover, what riches her heart might reveal to a husband, he dared not ask himself, yet could not abstain from radiantly surmising. His heart quickened its pace, and the horse he rode responded to that quickening. The young woman he escorted was forgotten.

She was not slow, however, to recall herself to his attention. 'I vow, Mr. Marden, my poor beast is going lame.'

'Are you sure of that?' His tone was discouraging. Being within ten miles of his golden destination, he was galled by the idea of delay. 'He looks to me fresh enough yet.'

'Poor Hector! Poor boy!' She cooed at her horse, stroking his neck fondly. He had lapsed into a walk. 'You're tired, my handsome. You need a

rest, don't you?' Obedient to her designs, the horse came to a standstill.

'But this is nonsense,' exclaimed Marden, incontinently. 'We must press on, or we shall not reach Upchurch before nightfall. It's no great distance truly; we have more than half the journey behind us; but the days are short, and the last mile or two is a lonely ride, and in darkness a hazardous one.'

'Oh,' she cried, looking suddenly small and helpless and appealing, 'I beg that you won't be angry with us, Mr Marden. Poor Hector is so very sorry. Aren't you, darling?' She leaned forward in the saddle and peered into the horse's face. 'Come, tell Sally. Can you not trot briskly on till nightfall? What, not even to please your Sally! . . . Ah no,' cried Sally, turning again to her escort, 'poor Hector is weary and footsore. He says he cannot go further till he is rested, Mr Marden. Please do not be angry with him. That were too sad an ending to your kindness to us. Indeed, sir, your black looks terrify me: I vow they do.' In witness of her terror she allowed a dazzling smile to play about her pretty features, which smile, however, pretending to find it of no effect, she quickly dismissed, putting in its place a half-rueful half-playful pout. She found a pocket-handkerchief and began dabbing her eyes with it. 'Of course, if you are resolved to be cruel . . .' She finished with a shrug of her small pathetic shoulders.

'Nay,' said Marden tolerantly, 'don't distress yourself, my dear. I am not after all such an ogre.'

He knew her tricks for what they were, and yet he felt some little compunction about overriding them. Tricks, yes : but these tricks were designed for the man's amusement, no less than for the woman's ; and up to a point he was prepared to help her play her game. To do otherwise had proved him, he thought, a bad sportsman, a prig, a solemn humourless fellow. Moreover the courtesy with which he had already treated her obliged him to persist in courtesy : trash though she was (his thoughts warningly repeated that epithet), he found satisfaction in what he supposed to be her conception of him, and was unwilling to incur dislike when gratitude and admiration, and more besides, could be had for less than the asking. But he could not resist the temptation to banter. ' Hector has chosen his moment well, for here is an inn, the last we shall see today. Hector's weariness is timely, madam.'

The landlord came out to welcome them, a short squat barrel of a man, bald, with heavy eyebrows, bearded jowls, and red whiskers gushing fiercely from cavernous nostrils. The horses were stabled, and Marden and his companion sat down and ordered refreshment. Having seen no strange face for many days, the landlord was ready to wax loquacious. He was boisterous, as though his recent isolation had starved him and the sight of company were going to his head like strong wine. When Marden contemptuously called his attention to a bug crawling across the windowsill, he burst into a loud guffaw, as though it had been the best joke in the

world and his guest the wittiest of gentlemen. And when he was asked by the lady to provide a dish of tea, he was riotous in his astonishment. 'Tea, ma'am? Bless my old bones, but I never seen the stuff. We be plain folk hereabouts as eats good bread and drinks good ale and plenty, and knows naught of such fangledangles as tea. Meaning no offence, ladyship, for there's no doubt tis dainty fine vittles for the gentry. My brother Tom's wife's daughter, what she got by her first man, for Tom got caught by a widder woman, and she brung her daughter with her, wedlock or no wedlock, as I always tell 'im, for he's a man as likes a joke and can take one, is brother Tom. And this daughter, which is to say Tom's wife's daughter by her first: this young female, which her name is Nancy Borage, Borage being the name of him that got her, not Tom's name, no such thing, Tom's my brother and her stepdad, as the saying is: well this Nancy Borage, she've seen this ere tea of yourn, and had it in her two hands, and tasted it, same as it might be a lady. And pretty fair muck, saving your ladyship's presence, pretty fair muck she christened it, for twas like a handful of birdseed it was, and so she gob it out. But she worn't a one to give in, nor she shouldn't be seeing she's a niece of mine, or would a bin if brother Tom had bin her getter, which he nearly was, for twas touch and goo: she worn't one to give in, and she knew this ere tea for a dainty eddicated dish. So when they tells her try spreading it on a bit of lardy toast, and there's nothing to

beat a bit of lardy toast of a cold morning cep tis a lump of fat bacon wi' good rich cracklin, I'm willin, says Nancy Borage, I'm willin, says she. But twornt no manner of good to 'er, like grit it wor, so she gob it out again. And then, if you please, someone says to bile it, so bile it she did, and the dirt that come out of it was a sight as they say to see. Biled it twice she did, to make sarten sure, and then twas none so bad, soft and swelled up, soft like biled cabbage, said Nancy Borage, which she's a truth speaking slut with all her faults, but no taste to un says she, no taste at all. Now I be a man, ladyship, as likes what you mi' call taste or contrariwise flaviour to me vittles. If vittles has no taste or flaviour, you can keep 'em, ladyship, for I wunt say thankee for 'em. But when it come to gentry tis another story, and if the likes of me was in the way of sarving the gentry which I mean in a regular way and style of business, which no one would be more pleased than myself, there again as I said to Nancy Borage, straight to her face I said it . . .'

But what he said to Nancy Borage was judged to be of less importance than what Mr Marden had to say to his companion. He interrupted the discourse and dismissed the landlord with a firmness that made his intention unmistakable.

'Ale I have, sir. Your humble servant, sir. My 'ouse is yours, sir.' He waddled away, and in a few minutes came back carrying a jug of ale. 'Which another thing, sir,' he said, bending confidentially towards Mr Marden, and casting a sly glance at the

young woman, 'which another thing, sir. There is, as the saying goo, beds above, if you and ladyship should be thinking to spend the night under my 'umble roof.'

'We shall not,' said Marden curtly. 'We must press on in a few minutes.'

The young woman intervened. 'Indeed, sir, but must we?' She turned charmingly to the landlord. 'My husband is too proud, landlord, to confess himself wearied by our long day's journey. Cannot you help me persuade him?'

Marden started; flushed; glared at the landlord. 'Have the goodness to leave us, fellow. You are too officious.' The landlord hesitated; Marden rose with a threatening gesture. 'Here!' He flung some money on the table. 'There's my scot. Now be off with you. And have those horses ready in ten minutes, d'you hear? And let there be no nonsense about it, or I'll skin the back off you. . . . And now, madam, since when have I been your husband, pray?'

He had turned to her expecting, even hoping, to find fear shining in her eyes. What he saw was admiration and more than a hint of tenderness. He was disconcerted, but he made shift to conceal the fact. 'I am waiting for your answer,' he said.

'Lud, sir, how can I answer you? When you are angry you terrify me. Is it a crime that I should be grateful to so obliging and handsome a gentleman? And so scrupulous withal. How many in your place but would have sought to take advantage

of an unprotected woman? But that,' she ended, with a wide-eyed adoring look, 'is something you would never do.'

A flicker of self-complacency kindled in his heart. The flattery was gross enough; but was there not, after all, something to be said for her point of view? Embarrassed by the thought of his own nobility he gave a nervous cough and fixed his gaze on distance. But when his glance travelled, as it needs must, in her direction again, he found her eyes still softly shining upon him with undiminished radiance. And it could not be denied that they were uncommonly pretty eyes in their fashion.

'You never would,' she repeated. 'Would you?'

'Indeed I trust not,' he answered: awkwardly enough, for self-satisfaction was giving place now to discomfort.

'No,' she said, in melting accents, 'you would never betray me. Not even,' she added, sighing wistfully, 'not even if I asked you to.'

'What do you mean?' He looked at her steadily, but she did not flinch. Her meaning was evident enough, but her motive was obscure. If her passion was real, it was as inconvenient as flattering; but it was flattering first of all, and disturbing. If feigned, what did she think to gain by the pretence? But the answer to that was not beyond all conjecture; and suddenly it flashed into his mind that this was a woman who had just been bereaved of one she called her brother, and it made the case no better that in calling him so she had probably lied. 'Mrs

Robinson,' said Marden coldly, 'for that is what you call yourself, I fancy, I think it time you heard some plain speaking. The man you called George Robinson, the man you called your brother, carried on his person some very curious marks and some very curious articles of property. Item, on his forearm an obscene drawing tattooed—unusual decoration for a gentleman. Item, an ill-scrawled letter written in thieves' jargon : still more unusual. Item, a black mask for the eyes, such as gentlemen of the road are in the habit of assuming in their more modest moments. Item . . . but perhaps I weary you with these details?'

The change in her face startled him, even though he had expected it. Fear distorted her. She was hunted, an outcast. He wondered that he had ever thought her pretty.

'I am a magistrate, Mrs Robinson, and during those days when you so wisely kept yourself retired to your room, prostrated as you were with your grief, I did my best to get at the truth of this affair. Your brother, or whatever he was to you, met his death by falling from his horse, the very horse you have been riding today. There was a witness, a man called Noke, and it would have been my duty to question that witness's honesty but for one or two circumstances. First, the body had not been robbed ; and there was no mark on it to suggest that he had been assaulted. Second, the pretty trifles I have enumerated for you, and other evidence which I took the trouble to obtain from other sources,

convinced me that the world was well rid of a rascal.' He paused, to note the effect of his words. The woman did not speak. Her face was gray, and she lacked even the presence of mind to faint. 'There was another thing we found. A lady's jewel-case.'

Her eyes grew wider. She nodded.

'The jewels are yours?' asked Marden.

She nodded again.

'Or your mistress's?' said he. 'Which is it?'

There was a long silence. The woman summoned all her reserves of courage, and Marden, watching, could not but admire her for it. She spoke at last in a voice quivering with suppressed hysteria. 'I thought he was a gentleman. I swear I did. If I'd thought he was such a dirty rat . . .'

'If he was the fellow I believe him to have been,' said Marden, seeing that she was disinclined to continue, 'he was not without a smattering of education. That makes him the more a scoundrel. These smooth-tongued gentlemanly rogues are the worst of a poisonous crew, and you were fortunate, my girl, that you did not have your throat cut. But that's not all, as I'd best warn you. Had I done my strict duty I should have committed you to the Assizes on suspicion of being that fellow's accomplice. But it would give me no pleasure to be the means of bringing a young woman to the gallows, so here we are, on our way to Upchurch, where, whatever you do or have done, you will be outside my jurisdiction.' He rose. 'Come

along, madam,' he said, with grim friendliness, 'we must go see if our horses are ready. We've spent time enough here. We must make haste. And on the road you shall tell me who taught you to play the lady so deftly. It will make a good story, I'll warrant.'

CHAPTER 8

IN WHICH, ACCORDING TO ITS CUSTOM,
THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS

FEDRUM, when Marden reached it, was already full of dusk ; but the dusk, to his quickened imagination, was no more than a soft dark cloak for the shining limbs of beauty. He left his horse in the care of a servant, and having been shewn to his room, and having washed away the soil and weariness of the journey, he went in search of Dr Humphrey, whom he found, according to his expectations, at work or at dream in his laboratory. At Marden's entry the doctor looked up, fixed his gaze upon him, but gave no sign of greeting. His eyes were lit with a remote speculation. He was a small spare man, in age a trifle over sixty. The angularity of his features, his sharp nose and his shaggy brows, gave him the look of a highly intelligent and benevolent dog. As befitted a man of his age and station, he was dressed soberly, and in a less recent mode than that affected by Marden ; and, unlike his young friend, he wore a wig, a grey wig whose colour contrasted sharply with the blackness of his brows. The curve of his nostril, the firm line of his mouth, suggested delicacy and resolution ; the large eyes, heavy-lidded and with pouches pendent, were so brightly illumined

by the mind that looked through them as to quicken the whole aging face with the animation of quest. He gazed unseeing at his guest; and Marden stood in the doorway waiting patiently, amusedly, for recognition.

‘Ah, Marden! I am delighted to see you, my dear sir. So you’ve arrived at last, I see. Yes, I see you have.’ As though to see still better, he came forward to meet the young man. ‘Is your horse looked to? Has my daughter been informed?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Marden. ‘At least I fully believe so. If not, there’s time enough. I would not have her disturbed yet. Bad news will keep.’ He ended with a wry, selfconscious smile. For now the idea of meeting Celia made him nervous; and he was ready to think himself an interloper, and to shun the encounter he had so eagerly sought all day.

‘Bad news? What bad news is this?’ The doctor blinked sympathetically.

‘I was referring, sir, to my own audacity, to my . . . that is . . . in short, to my unexpected arrival at your house.’ He hurried on, blushing for his gaucherie. ‘Guessing you to be here, sir, I took the liberty of seeking you unannounced. But I see you are engaged——’

‘Liberty fiddlesticks!’ said his host, with some asperity. ‘Engaged I am truly: poking and prying into the nature of things, like any child staring at an ant-hill: but never so deeply engaged as not to welcome you, my dear sir.’ The two men bowed to each other. ‘You come at a happy moment,’

added Dr Humphrey. 'I am on the point of trying an experiment in aerostatics. Come now: you shall see it.' His voice was excited, his eyes fiery with eagerness. 'But first,' said he, with an abrupt difficult resumption of formal politeness, 'tell me your news. You have had an agreeable journey?'

'Very agreeable,' said Marden. 'But I am interrupting you——'

'And,' said the doctor, almost sternly, as though resolved to fulfil the very letter of civility, 'you have enjoyed good health, you and your household?'

'Alas, no,' answered the young man. 'For myself I have nothing to complain of. But my man Dewdney——'

'Excellent!' The doctor turned back to his bench. 'Now this little experiment, my friend, is . . . ' His voice trailed away.

'My man Dewdney,' repeated Marden, 'who had been of my household longer than I can remember. . . '

'Ah yes,' agreed the doctor. 'Faithful fellow. . . . This little experiment, Marden, is one that may have very far-reaching results. But you were telling about your servant?'

Marden thought it best to come to the point quickly and have done. 'We buried him last week.'

'Yes?' said the doctor, smiling pleasantly. 'Very far-reaching results indeed. So you buried him, did you?' Seeing his guest's grave look, he tried to recall his wandering thoughts. 'What was that! Did you say you had buried him? *Buried*, did you say?'

Marden nodded.

‘Poor fellow! God rest his soul. Now this is what I propose to do. Here is a basin of common water. Very sad indeed, Marden. Upon my word it is. Common well water, d’ye see? And here is the allantois of a calf, which I’ve had specially prepared for me at the Faculty. Now from this common water I am going to extract a vapour, and with that vapour I am going to fill the allantois. And then—*che sera sera, signor*, as my old master, Salvemini, used to say.’ He contemplated this prospect in silence for a moment. Marden was forgotten, and knew it.

‘I think, if you don’t mind, sir——’

‘Eh? Yes, certainly, my boy. You’ll find Celia in the music-room, or the library, or perhaps the . . . music-room. We shall meet later.’

‘Doctor,’ said Marden, speaking stiffly to hide his embarrassment, ‘I propose, with your permission, to ask Miss Humphrey’s hand in marriage.’

‘Quite so. Quite so,’ returned Miss Humphrey’s father. And he spoke in the rather loud cheerful tone of one who has not heard a word of what was said to him and will resort to any subterfuge rather than have it repeated. ‘She will be delighted to see you. The music-room, I think. Delighted.’

Whether she were indeed delighted was more than the young man dared ask himself when presently, as her father had foretold, he found her in the music-room, sitting by the fire. She sat as though spiritually folded into herself, her hands resting in

her lap, her glance held by the glowing logs ; and something in her posture, some small quietness, some hint of a serenity at once childlike and mature, touched in her lover a chord so intimate and dear, stirred so ancient and compelling a music, that for a moment he forgot himself, his hopes and his timidity, and stood in a trance as if listening. Under this sudden assault of beauty his heart took refuge in admiration of detail : the long lashes, the russet-brown ringlets, the candid boyish mouth, the small straight nose that was somehow both proud and mischievous. Not in any one of these features, nor in their sum, lay the secret of his enthrallment. These were but the outward signs of a mystery. Not his sight alone, his ear, too, was enchanted : her voice greeting him made the spell more binding. But so soon as he himself spoke, the world of habit closed in on him, and remembering his errand he felt courage ebbing away. Now surely was the time, he told himself. But no : it must be later : if I am precipitate I ruin all. If I speak now it will astonish and alarm her and she will think me a boor. And to distract himself, while he stammered his replies, he fell to praising in his mind her simple elegance and to comparing her appearance, greatly to its advantage, with that of the fine urban ladies with their vast hoops and enormous head-dresses. In her exquisite person were combined, he thought, the wholesome natural beauty of a Theocritan shepherdess and the charm of refined sensibility. Even so, with all his newly returned

selfconsciousness, he found courage to beg her for a song ; and though at first she quietly evaded the request, at its repetition she moved without protest to the instrument, and touched the keys, and with the first warm tingling response of the plucked strings became blissfully enclosed in the world her music made. And this is her world, he thought in his rapture : this eternity, this perfection, this radiant and all-sufficing harmony of delights : this is hers, and this she is. It was a love song she sang, in her cool clear voice, and a song centuries old ; but the dew was still fresh upon it, and that the sentiment was perhaps more manly than womanly made her rendering of it the more serenely impersonal :

*Go to bed, sweet muse : take thy rest ;
Let not thy soul be so opprest :
Though she deny thee, she doth but try thee,
Whether thy mind will ever prove unkind.
O, Love is but a bitter sweet jest.*

*Muse not upon her smiling looks ;
Think that they are but baited hooks :
Love is a fancy, love is a frenzy,
Let not a toy then breed thee such annoy,
But leave to look upon such fond books.*

*Learn to forget such idle toys,
Fitter for youths and youthful boys ;
Let not one sweet smile thy true love beguile,
Let not a frown for ever cast thee down :
Then sleep, and go to bed in these joys.*

Yes, this, he swore, was her world and her dominion : of this paradise, this shining universe wrought of spun silk and melting harmonies, this pattern of sweet sound, these rhyming silences, this art that could distil intoxication from the very dregs of human melancholy : of this she was queen. As he listened, and in the pause that followed his listening, he dreamed himself to be sharing that dominion with her, all the heartache of the world forgotten, or remembered only that it might enhance their joy by contrast, as on summer days we sharpen our delight in birds and flowers and grass and golden sky by recollections of winter. And still, as he half-knew, he was weaving—of her looks, her graces, her accomplishments—a fantasy that should screen him, till he had courage enough to face it, from the loveliness, dimly surmised, of the real Celia, the living and secret heart. He was not new to gallantry, but he was new to love ; his occasional amours had brought no ease to the hidden hunger that lived in him, had brought indeed nothing but a half-despised pleasure and a dull disillusionment. He had never knowingly desired, as now he desired, an intimate communion of the spirit ; or at least had never been drawn, as now he was being drawn, into the persuasion that this glory was perhaps imminent. It was this hope, and the fear shadowing it, that made him tremble and falter ; made him, at the supper table, first garrulous, talking much of his interest in Dr Humphrey's researches, and then tongue-tied, so that Celia was moved to tease him

into speech again. He became stern with himself, and formed an inflexible resolve ; yet when, an hour later, in the music-room, the old doctor rose from his chair and with a mumbled apology went off to the studies he could no longer resist, leaving the two young people alone together, Celia's lover fell a-trembling again, telling himself, with desperate resolution : Before we leave this room I shall have asked her to marry me. And she will have said—what ? Conjecture bereaved him of breath and made his heart gallop. If he won her, the world would burst into flower and flame ; if he failed, there were no words that could describe the desolation that would engulf him.

‘Another song,’ he pleaded. And he came close to where she sat, that he might lead her to the instrument.

With a half shrug she rose, placed her hand lightly in his arm, walked the three necessary steps, and sat down at the keyboard.

‘Perhaps, Mr Marden, you would prefer something of a newer fashion this time ?’

He did not hear her ; or, hearing, did not understand. For he was suddenly in the throes of a gigantic struggle. He had forgotten his request that she should sing. He was unaware that she had asked him a question and awaited the answer. Everything was vanished from his mind except the task that tormented it and the remote vision that was the goal of its striving. He stood stiff and straight, and almost angry, with his gaze fixed on the wall opposite him.

And he said, like a boy repeating a lesson : ' Madam, I have Dr Humphrey's permission to ask your hand in marriage.'

It seemed that an age passed, an age of silence and terror and expectation, before he could bring himself to glance at her. And then it was too late to read her answer, unless anything of significance could be read in her drooping posture, hands in lap, eyes downcast : just such a posture as had startled him earlier in the day by its beauty and bravery. Despite his fever, his liquefying knees, his parched mouth, he contrived to speak again, addressing her bowed head.

' I hope . . . may I hope . . . ' But this was sheer arrogance : how dared he hope anything ! ' Miss Humphrey, this silence is torture. Your father, I say, consents to my . . . my asking . . . in short . . . ' But his ' in short ' proved very long indeed ; for without a sign from her he could not go on.

At last she looked up, with a whimsical half-wry smile. ' Well, Mr Marden ? My father . . . ? '

' Consents,' said Marden eagerly. ' I have . . . I have his permission to address you. If I may speak . . . '

' Indeed, sir,' she cried, with a little laugh, ' I am waiting for you to speak. You have my father's permission, you say. And now you have mine. I am all attention.'

' Ah, you are laughing at me.' But, despite that or because of it, he was more at ease. ' But I'm

resolved to tell you that I love you, that I am your devoted slave, and that I shall count myself the happiest man in the world if you will be my wife. . . . Oh Celia, I'm no hand at making speeches——'

'On the contrary, Mr Marden, you make them very prettily. I find you are full of unsuspected talent.'

He looked at her ruefully, ready to believe himself disdained. There was mockery in her smile, but there was friendliness too. Amused she might be, and he did not grudge her that: but she was not displeased. Thinking that her air of mischief was perhaps designed to wean him without unkindness from his hopes of her, 'I doubt it is impossible,' he surmised, 'that you should care for me.'

'Is it?' said she, still smiling.

Impetuously, with sudden hope, he put a hand on her shoulder. 'Do you mean, can you mean . . . ?'

'Nay, sir, but I perfectly agree with you. It is impossible that I should care.' He withdrew his hand hastily. A flush mounted his cheek. But before he could find words she went on: 'And even did I disagree, it would not become me to contradict you, would it, Mr Marden? . . . Oh Jack, what a precious booby you are!' He was at her side again, with his hands upon her. She leaned back, laughing up at him.

There was tenderness already kindled in her teasing eyes, and with the first kiss it became a clear light, and the laughter vanished from them, leaving only the sweet pain of love to reinforce the mute

language of her lips. In the touch of those lips, in the light of those eyes, he found wonder and assuaging and the rapture of homecoming. The darkness was cast out of him; his exile from some long-lost and long-forgotten paradise was at an end; he had lost his small lonely self, had found release and fulfilment, in this largeness of love; his spirit and hers mingled with their mingling breath. And now, with the light of confessed love shining in her face, she was a new Celia: a surprised, happy, trustful child, born into a new world. They gazed at each other, and every tick of the clock added another coin to the heaped treasure. Each face, in the other's sight, was a country at once new and familiar: every small discovery was greeted, in their hearts, with a cry of startled recognition: It's you, you! Their pulses beat to that music. The wonder was less that they had found each other than that they had ever been made twain at all, so close now, it seemed, was their communion.

'You have another name, haven't you?' he said.

She nodded. 'Celia Ann.'

'Celia is cool, and Ann is kind, and both are lovely . . .'

'And both of us are yours,' she assured him, 'if . . .'

'If!' he exclaimed, in mock reproach. 'I'll have no ifs.'

'If you are sure you love me,' she said slipping away from him, 'and if,' she added, and with no smile to cloak the warning, 'if I am myself sure of it.'

‘My dearest,’ he protested solemnly, ‘I am your faithful lover till death, and beyond. You cannot doubt me.’

‘I cannot doubt,’ said she coolly, seating herself at some little distance from him, ‘that you are in a mood now to be faithful. And indeed I heartily wish you may prove so, Mr Marden.’

Mr Marden ! Was he become Mr Marden again ! He stared in alarm. ‘Celia ! My dear !’

A smile reassured him, but she would not let him approach her. She had resumed possession of herself, and the unexpectedness of her demeanour delighted as well as disconcerted him. ‘How cruel you are,’ he said fondly. His enthrallment was complete.

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CHAPTER 9

BROTHER RAPHE WRITES A LETTER AND TALKS WITH HIS DOVES

TIME passed quickly at Fedrum, but Jack Marden and Celia, living in their new world, the world of each other, took small account of its passing. Sooner or later, as he knew, Marden must go back to his Fee, resume supervision of the estate, and make arrangements for his wedding, which Celia, without committing herself to a precise date, had promised should not be delayed unduly. He was aware of possessing, in Raphe Gandy, a steward on whose riper wisdom he could depend more securely than on his own, so that a day or two more or less of absence made no great matter. Meanwhile, at Maiden Holt, Brother Raphe was far from dull. Despite his newly assumed duties, which he performed as punctually as might be, he still found occasion for the busy idleness, the fruitful meditation, that was his life's habit. In this he was aided, against his will and far more than he suspected, by the contriving of Mrs Dewdney the housekeeper, who, being deeply shocked at the sight of His Reverence with sacking tied round his middle and secular mop and pail in his hand, did everything in her power, which was considerable, to frustrate

his industrious intentions. So on the fifth day of his stewardship he was able to devote a large part of the morning to the composition of a letter :

My dear Sir : Having been granted leave of absence from the kitchen, and a thought too willingly for my Self-esteem, for it puts me in mind that Mrs Dewdney does not greatly love to have me there at her heels, I now have the pleasure to send you my loving Duty, together with such odds and ends of gossip as I hope may amuse you. There have been doings a-plenty in the Fee, much wantonness having come to light, and in the sequel a pretty uproar, so that indeed there are like to be heads broken unless you soon return to restore order and peace among us. But this is no way to tell a tale, so I must acquaint you first with the cause of it all, which is that a fellow that squats upon the Common, Noke his name, hath got Erasmus Bailey the innkeeper's daughter with child. It seems the young woman contriv'd to carry her secret a full five months, and would so have persisted till the very day of her delivery, I dare wager, had not a sudden jealousy prick't her on to this untimely disclosure : I say untimely, not as condoning her sin, but rather to present the opinion which she in her stubborn fear must have held of the matter, forgetting, poor child, that from our Saviour and Judge there can be no concealment, and that to escape the world's censure is scarce worth the contriving. She is, as

to appearance, a quiet and comely wench, and you would have said a modest one, but I fear it must make her guilt the deeper that she hath gotten some semblance of education and refinement from her father's teaching, who, as you may know, is not unletter'd, though his manners accord, as they should, with his humble station. Well, to make no more words of it, it seems that this Letitia Bailey, or Tisha as they call her hereabouts, surpris'd her paramour in the arms of Mykelborne the wheelwright's daughter, and liked the sight so ill that she must needs blurt out the whole story and publish her own dishonour to the world, or, what is the same thing, to her mother : the which worthy woman rounds upon Bailey, declaring " that if he is half a man, which she begs leave to doubt, he will take a horsewhip to the villain and see that he makes an honest woman of their daughter." I was not, you must understand, privy to this dialogue, but I can pretty well vouch for madam's style of conversation, having had, in these last days, a sufficient taste of it.

At this point Brother Raphe put down his pen and took a turn or two round the room, the better to recall the scene to his mind. It puzzled him to remember that while one part of his judgment had applauded Mrs Bailey, her anger and distress, another part was won to the reluctant verdict that Tisha was the better woman. Despite her sullen looks and stubbornly evasive answers, and even

despite the scandal of her deeds, he judged her to be sound at core ; and, whether by intuition or guess-work, he quickly surprised her secret, perceiving her to be ashamed less of her passion than of her malice. That she seemed too little repentant of her carnal sin distressed him, but he rejoiced to find her purged of the deadlier and spiritual distemper, and could not in his heart think so ill of her as her parents were resolved to do. He resumed his letter :

Not that you are to think Mrs Bailey a mere virago, for she is an honest good body enough, as we have always found ; but this affliction hath set her beside herself, and I fancy it galls her that her husband, with less relish for vengeance than she, holds himself something aloof and apart in this affair and is inclined to be over-tender with his daughter, whom she, for her part, cannot bewhore enough, though in the same breath she calls her an innocent fool. Indeed, were she a sensible woman she would be at a loss how to reconcile the one charge with the other ; for she must have it, since Letitia is her daughter, that Letitia is something little short of a saint ; and further, since Letitia hath play'd a wanton's part, that Letitia is a wicked slut. So it would seem that Letitia is two persons, and that the paragon her mother conceiv'd hath been corrupted by the hussy her father begat. Yet this, too, is unsatisfying doctrine, for the good woman blames and acquits her daughter a dozen times in as many seconds, and

insists that Noke is the sole authour of this notable wickedness. But, to make an end of levity, it is in all conscience a bad business ; and Satan hath done his work well ; and I heartily pray that his triumph of poor Tisha may be short-liv'd, and by God's grace it shall be so.

But I perceive that if I make not better speed with my Tale you will be out of all patience with me ; so must tell you that we had quite a procession come to Maiden Holt, demanding "that they must see Squire Marden on a whipping matter." To which I return'd answer "that if they must see Squire Marden they had best prepare themselves for a day's journey" ; but came out on the heels of this message to meet them and discover what was amiss. Whereupon the foregoing history comes pouring out upon me, from as many mouths as were present, in one great confluence, so that I was hard put to it to make sense of their much matter ; for in addition to the three Baileys there were come Mykelborne with wife and daughter and a very officious smart young fellow named Broome and a good half-dozen others, with the seducer, Noke, truss'd up in their midst and having as little to say as the rest had much. When I could obtain a hearing I warn'd them that "it was not in my power to order a whipping and that pending your return they would do best to go peacefully home again." This did not please my petitioners, and they vow'd they would take the law into their own

hands and away to the stocks with this rascal, and that Parson Croup was a good-natured gentleman and would never gainsay them, and much more to the same tune. "Give me leave to finish what I was saying," said I, "and tell me what hinders the pair from marrying and so making their peace with God." And then the worst of the tale came out, for Mykelborne, push'd forward by his Women-folk, and urged to "speak up like a man", makes bold to ask me "whether I was so bad a Christian as to make a whore of his daughter Jenny," adding such plain words as convinced me that she too, to wit Jenny Mykelborne, is in a fair way to becoming the mother of a bastard by Noke; whereupon the rogue himself cries out, with a defiant laugh, "that he is ready to take both wenches to church, if that will satisfy them, but if he must choose betwixt 'em, then he'll marry Jenny." For this sauciness he was rough-handled by Broome, who, when I asked him why he concern'd himself in this affair, declares "that but for this disgrace he would have married the wench himself." As to which of the twain he meant we were not left long in doubt, for Tisha Bailey, who had as yet not spoke a word, was heard to say that Broome flatter'd himself, for "she would never have married such a conceited coxcomb though she had been fifty times a virgin"; a speech having more spirit than sense, for virginity does not admit of numerical graduation. But before I could interpose further, accusations were

flying thick and fast ; a deal of mud was stirred up, and by what was said it soon became clear that there was not a man among them but had some lewdness and lechery to answer for, so that it was a pretty sight to see them all so zealous in reprobation of their brother. None the less they would not be dissuaded of their purpose, and though I charged them in God's name to do nothing in malice, my words fell upon deaf ears, as the sequel proved, for before nightfall the man Noke had been duckt and pillory'd and pelted with all manner of offal. He is a sorry rogue and deserves to smart for it, but the spirit of his persecutors is such as only the Devil can delight in : indeed there is more of the Devil in this than in the sin it pretends to punish, grievous though that is. I find it not easy to think with charity of this rabble, so little concern'd with true goodness, yet so merry and lascivious in the persecution of malefactors ; but they are God's creatures no less than we, and we must beware of thinking ourselves to be of more account in His sight than the least or worst of them.

With this salutary reflection Brother Raphe again laid down his pen ; and presently, leaving the letter unfinished, he rose and went in search of food for the doves. In these gentle creatures he took great pleasure : the delicate sheen of their plumage charmed him ; their voices comforted his heart and conjured him out of winter into a paradise of

sunshine and green shadow and running water ; and the pattern of their flight was a continuing counter-point, innocent and subtle as the love of God. He sometimes indulged the fancy that the spirits of the blest would from time to time assume the form of doves, and that he himself might some day spread wings and fly away and be at rest in flight, and, in that contemplation of the Eternal which was God's bounty to the disimprisoned soul, forget the cruelties and enmities and dolorous disasters of earth. The dovecote was a stout red-bricked building surrounded by tall birches : in summer a cool refuge, in winter feathery warm with duskiness and soft crooning and fluttering wings. This morning, as he entered, he experienced more than ever a feeling of sanctuary. At his first word of greeting, the air became full of wings, a winged cloud that settled upon him, his head, his shoulders, his outstretched arms : he stood like a man drenched in a fountain of birds, drenched and contented. ' Now, my dears,' said he, ' it is breakfast-time. Let me see what I can find in my pocket. But first of all . . . ' First of all, lest there should chance to be a Christian among them, he said grace, and at the words '*et spiritus sancti*' he thought of the Holy Dove and became lost for a moment in radiant conjecture. . . .

When the birds had been fed with the food he brought them, and their spirits quickened (let us hope) by his homilies, he went back to his letter :

And now, my dear Jack, I must hasten to an end; for Mrs Dewdney hath been free of me too long, and there are scuttles to be fill'd. Pray give my respects to Dr Humphrey and his amiable daughter, if it chance they retain any recollection of me; and for yourself I trust to find on your return that you have quite recover'd your old colour, for I am fully persuaded that your indifferent health these last few months hath mostly proceeded from your interior vexations, which, whatever they may be and however deep hidden even from yourself, will be quickly dispersed in the sunshine of your friends' kindness and hospitality. We were on short commons last Friday, being unable to procure in time the dry salt fish and red herrings we had promised ourselves, but made shift to do very well on Apple Pie, with afterwards a little cabbage. Eggs are today but ten a groat, so I doubt you have the advantage of us in that. Our weather is a trifle out of humour; frost came sudden last night and froze the rain on the roads, which are like glass and very hazardous as you may suppose. But, let the weather change as it may, I am always,

My dear Sir,

Your obliged humble servant,
and brother in Christ,
RAPHE GANDY.

P.S. I forgot to say that the girl Tisha would not hear of Marriage with Noke, once she had

discover'd his perfidy. It is a double pity if she must be ruin'd, for she hath a high spirit, and more honesty, I believe, than her deeds declare. P.P.S. Mrs Dewdney now tells me (Wednesday morn.) that the Baileys are for marrying their girl to Tom Shellett, your cowherd. He is no match for her and is urged to the business, I fancy, more by promise of a plump dowry than by affection or even (which were at least a better reason than cupidity) by the enticement of her person. Tisha is not yet persuaded to it, but since her mother promises to shut the door against her if she refuse, there is small doubt of the issue.

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CHAPTER 10

CHANCE, WITH THE HELP OF A PROUD LADY, MAKES TROUBLE FOR JACK MARDEN

WITHIN an hour of receiving this letter, Jack Marden shewed it to Celia.

‘I’ve escaped a great deal of vexation, it seems. But at poor Father Gandy’s expense.’

As she read the letter she said to herself : He is too sure of me, or he would not ask me to read so squalid a story. Were I his wife already he could hardly treat me with less ceremony. She was not in fact shocked or offended : the lower orders being so remote from her world, their misdemeanours were as little embarrassing to discuss as the habits of farm-yard creatures. But she wondered whether Jack did not take her too much for granted, and this speculation, this fear, this conviction—for the matter grew worse with thinking on it—was born of the fancy that she had perhaps been too easy with him, and by yielding her heart too readily had encouraged him to think himself irresistible. She was not vain : she thought Jack wonderful and herself not at all so. But she was afraid—for now her light fancy had suddenly assumed the dimensions of terror—lest by impulsiveness, by the very honesty of her love, she had made herself of less account in his sight.

The fear kindled a flush in her cheeks.

‘I think you need not pity him overmuch.’ She handed back the letter. Her voice and manner were cool.

He was bewildered, and cursed himself for a clumsy fool. ‘Need I not?’ he said. ‘And, pray, why?’

There was constraint between them, and she avoided looking at him. ‘It would seem to have amused him, this vulgar comedy.’

‘I did not read his letter so,’ said Marden. ‘I have the greatest respect and love for Father Gandy, and he is not the man to think lightly of such a matter, even did his cloth permit it.’ This was true, but its implications did less than justice both to the priest’s urbane temper and to Marden’s own honesty. ‘I assure you, my dear Celia, he is the worthiest of men.’

‘I have no doubt of it,’ she answered. ‘I find he is far too worthy a man to think harshly of a woman, so she be pretty, no matter how grossly she has smirched her sex’s honour. No doubt you are with him in that?’

Marden summoned an uneasy laugh. He came nearer and took her hand. ‘But are you not forgetting, my love, that he is our spiritual father? Who am I—who are we—to pit our judgement against his?’

Before she could answer, her father came into the room. He bustled over to the fire, rubbing his hands and blowing out his cheeks, and saying ‘Ah!

Phew . . . ah ! ' : in fine, doing all those things by which your man of sedentary habits advertises that he has been taking exercise. Dr Humphrey had ridden that day to Upchurch and back, visiting his old friend Captain Matters, a retired naval man under whose command he had sailed twenty years back as ship's doctor. The ride, he felt, had done him good ; his muscles were agreeably fatigued ; his blood flowed more freely than its wont ; and he felt extremely virtuous. With Captain Matters he had taken a bottle or two of good wine, besides eating heartily of a saddle of mutton, a couple of boiled fowls, a pig's face well roasted, and some apple tarts and damson cheese. He had enjoyed his ride, he had enjoyed his meal, and he had greatly enjoyed the talk, which had consisted, as so much good talk does, mainly of sentences beginning ' Yes, and do you remember . . . ' By this incantation the two friends had conjured their vanished past into being, and lived in it for an hour or two from the depths of their easy chairs, sitting one each side of the purring fire and with a jar of tobacco between them. It gave a wonderful relish to this comfort to remember how mountainous and green the sea had looked that bleak March morning in '28 (' or was it '27—how time flies, to be sure ! ') when they had thought, with good reason, that their last hour was come ; and there was pleasure, as well as a momentary sadness, in recalling poor Benjamin Creed, who thought himself a singer, and a politician, and a deep thinker, and a rake, and could not hear of any achievement

without wishing it had been his own, and yet in spite of his nonsense was a good seaman and a good fellow, and died absurdly, like a hero, in trying to rescue the ship's cat. This rich feast of reminiscence, following the more material feast, had warmed and stimulated Dr Humphrey, so that he was now, for the moment, a changed man, and within an ace of being boisterous.

'Well, my children,' he cried gaily, 'here I am back again. And I hope you have borne my absence with fortitude. Eh, Jack, you rascal? Did the time lag heavily, my boy, with none but my daughter to entertain you? I trust not, i' faith, for in a moment or two I must leave you again and pursue my studies.' He winked at his prospective son-in-law, standing with his back to the hearth and enjoying the sensation of warming calves. Marden smiled not very happily, but the older man took this to be a sign of lover's shyness and was the merrier for it. 'Ah yes, Jack, and I've been hearing a sad tale about you from my old friend Matters. Seems you had a thieving trollop in your custody and failed to get her hanged.'

Marden gaped. The allusion, whatever it imported, was untimely. 'Indeed, sir, you are merry with me. I'm no hangman, nor judge either.'

'Well, that's as may be, my boy. But what of this Robinson woman, as she calls herself? Who is she that she claims acquaintance with you?'

'Robinson?' The young man changed colour, for he felt his mistress's eyes upon him. 'Does she

claim so? I wonder at her impudence.'

'You need not wonder long,' said Dr Humphrey, 'for her impudence is shortly to be dealt with at the Assizes. It seems she was brought before Matters on a charge of horse-stealing. 'Twas my young Lord Halford's horse that had been snatched from his stables a se'nnight or more since, and he himself caught her riding it; and though the young scamp has been bedded with the wench, if all tales be true, he takes it very ill that she should prove a thief. And now what does she do but declare, on oath, that she had the horse from a fellow that was killed last month on Dyking Common, which is in Squire Marden's Fee, she says; and Squire Marden, says she, was a very kind handsome gentleman and would speak for her. So there's your character, Jack. And let's hope you can give the wench herself as good a one. Ha ha ha!'

'Indeed,' said Marden gravely, 'but I must say what I can for the unhappy wretch. She is indifferent honest where virtue is in question, but I believe she is not a thief. I must ride over to see your friend Captain Matters, sir, and tell him what I can in her favour. I will go tomorrow.' He turned to Celia and with a bow added: 'With your kind leave, my dear Celia?'

She acknowledged his attention with icy politeness. 'Is it wise to delay so long, since your friend, it seems, is in danger of hanging?'

'Come, my dear, what's this?' cried her father. 'Tomorrow's time enough, and the lad don't want

to turn out for a cold ride at this time of day.'

'We do not know what he wants, father. In his eagerness to save his friend from the gallows he will hardly stay to consider his comfort, let alone ours. It is not to be expected of any man.'

Dr Humphrey shrugged his shoulders and made at Marden a comical guilty grimace. 'She is resolved to quarrel with us, Jack. Alas, alas, we are in disgrace, my friend.' He glanced uneasily from one to the other of the lovers and saw that they wanted to be rid of him. He had innocently made mischief between them and he blamed himself, but the matter was beyond his mending. With a sigh and a shrug he betook himself out of the room.

'Celia, what have I done to displease you?'

'Why should you suppose me to be displeased?'

He was nettled by this evasion. 'Twice you have called this woman my friend, and you must know that she is no such thing. It is true that I was of some service to her in her extremity, but that is all. She was seduced by a rogue, who brought her to the Fee, lodged with her at the inn there, and then deserted her, riding off on one horse and leading another. Within an hour of that treachery—indeed within ten minutes of it, if my reckoning is right—he was thrown and killed, embarrassed, as I understand, by the conduct of the led horse. A man called Noke—the rascal mentioned in Father Gandy's letter—witnessed the accident, secured the remaining horse to a tree, and brought me the dead man to Maiden Holt. It fell to my lot, therefore, to hold an inquest

on the matter. And there's small doubt that by falling from his horse that fellow cheated the executioner of a duty. He was certainly a thief and likely enough a cut-throat. As to that, I need not weary you with the evidence.'

'You need not,' said Celia coldly. 'Already I begin to see the matter more clearly. You are asking me to approve of your friend Mrs Robinson on the grounds that she was a thief's drab. I confess it is strange pleading, but no doubt there is method in it.'

Marden was not only indignant: he was even stupid enough to be astonished. That women were incapable of fairness to each other was a maxim he had often enough heard and assented to. But Celia was Celia; and Celia, he had thought, was perfection. Stung by her speech, 'You are unjust, madam!' he cried. 'Upon my soul you are. You condemn an innocent woman without a hearing. It happens that I gave her the protection of my escort as far as Upchurch, and during that ride I got from her the whole story. She has been weak and foolish, and over-fond of a scoundrel. But I do not and cannot believe her to be vicious at heart. And I believe that you, too, could you but see her, would think as I do.'

'At least I can congratulate her upon her advocate,' retorted Celia. 'You defend the creature with much spirit, Mr Marden: I might almost say, with heat. Whatever the nature of your debt to Mrs Robinson, I think you may now count it paid.'

‘Debt? I do not understand you.’

‘I cannot believe you so obtuse.’ For a moment her irony wavered, and her anger shewed nakedly. ‘Can you not see that by your solicitude for this woman you insult me? Innocent indeed! You are too ardent. And why, pray, did you conceal from me that you had had a companion on your journey here?’

Why? His mind uneasily echoed the question. It was a small enough matter, but he had preferred not to mention it. Then, it would have provoked no more than mild surprise; now, it wore another colour.

‘I see you have no answer ready,’ said Celia. ‘Do not trouble to invent one.’

He became desperate; his heart cried out to her; but pride and anger would not let him use the language of persuasion. ‘If you are resolved to think ill of me,’ he said stiffly, ‘I cannot prevent you.’

‘If you persist in your officiousness on this creature’s behalf,’ she answered, ‘I shall know what to think, and what to do.’

They left it at that, and for what little remained of the day treated each other with studied politeness, greatly to the discomfort, when he was present, of Dr Humphrey. Retiring early, Celia cried herself to sleep, and woke a dozen times in the drear night, frightened of what she had done, seeing the prospect of happiness slip from her, yet feeling unable to arrest the course of events. She was frightened and

lonely and perplexed, a forlorn child, hating Jack, angry with him, loving and wanting him : wanting him so much that she dared not surrender to him but on the terms her pride dictated, for if I yield now, she thought, he will think me an easy conquest and cease to care for me. And with the thought that he cherished a kindness, if nothing more, for that wretched unknown woman, she tried to harden her heart against him ; and in this, when morning came, she seemed to have succeeded, for she presided at the breakfast-table without any sign of discomposure, and sustained with him and her father an elegant and unmeaning conversation.

The old man was gleeful at heart, thinking that the cloud had passed out of the lovers' sky. But to Marden this calm seemed more ominous than open warfare. Nevertheless he saddled his horse and rode away and made his affidavit to Captain Matters. He did what he must ; but it was not alone a sense of justice that moved him, and not alone compassion for an outcast woman. Celia had in effect 'dared' him, and even had he been so little scrupulous as to be willing to withhold his evidence, he would still have lacked courage to refuse battle with her. If I let her rule me in this, he said, she will despise me for a weakling ; and because he was truly weak, because he was so much in dread of losing her, he dared not appear so. But now, he thought, as he rode quickly back to her, now I can crave her forgiveness, even though I have done no wrong. And he tasted in anticipation the sweetness of reconciliation,

She greeted him stonily. 'May I ask where you have been? It is a matter that concerns us both.'

He bowed, trembling and angry: angry that she must force these formal manners upon him. 'To Upchurch, as you well know. On the business we discussed yesterday.'

She thought: I hate him, I hate him. If she had said as much to Marden, he would perhaps have known the true violence of her love and made all right between them. But she controlled and concealed herself. 'Very well,' she said. And it seemed by her air to be a matter of infinite unimportance. 'You are released from your engagement, Mr Marden.'

'You cannot mean that—for so small a thing.' He suddenly seized her hands, and the contact made him for a moment forget her words, so that he would have kissed her. But she, though longing to surrender, and sick with loneliness, turned sharply away and with her hands, her stiff body, her disdainful looks, repulsed him.

He bowed, accepting dismissal. 'Your pardon, madam. I will go saddle my horse again.'

So he rode back to his Fee. The sights he had taken pleasure in a week ago because they had been the background for his vision of Celia were for the same cause hateful to him now. He looked in upon himself and shuddered at the ugliness he saw there. Because he was rejected by love he felt himself to be unlovable and loathsome, and he tried to hate the girl who had made him feel so; and did at moments

hate her, with a murderous and lustful hatred, an impulse to ravish and destroy. This, he thought, proved him vile, and so justified the verdict he imputed to her ; and he was alone with his vileness, an outcast from the family of mankind. That final gesture of hers, seeming to speak her disgust of his very person, had changed and unmanned him, filling him with an ugly and angry shame. Deep in his unconscious heart the child he had been ran in terror from a beloved face turned strange ; but this memory lay beyond reach of his introspection and the poison worked the more shrewdly because it worked in secret. By the time he reached home he was drugged with his own gall, so that there seemed to be two of him : the man who smiled and was evasively polite with Brother Raphe, confessing to no greater disease than weariness and an aching head ; and this other, this proud, tortured, and self-torturing Ishmael, this demon of hate and self-hate, this exile from life, who would never again, he vowed, allow it to be guessed that he had a heart like other men. In dreams that night, charmed by the sleek grace of her form and the shy beauty of her wondering eyes, he pursued a hind in the forest, and caught her, and coaxed her into friendship, and felt her body turn to writhing maggots under his touch. He woke sweating, and remembered Celia ; but presently he found he had fallen into a deep well ; his bare feet touched a slimy bottom ; the water, creeping with cold life, came up to his armpits. It was dark and cold and silent, and he thought that he must stay

there for ever, dreadfully immortal, and never again hear a human voice or feel the sun on his hands. The world above was infinitely remote, a mere mind-picture of something long lost or perhaps only imagined. He exhausted himself with sobbing and shouting, and the walls of the well gave back a hollow sound like madness, till at last that too failed him, and, though he seemed to be shouting still, the silence was absolute, a vast void. If only someone would let the bucket down for me, he thought; and with the thought came hope and a renewal of longing. In this expectation, with the sickness of despair often intervening, he lived many long years, years as many and as slow as the small slimy things that lived in the dank mud of the walls and were his only companions. At last, light from above blazed down on him, and in that shaft of radiance, partly obscuring it, the dark shape of the bucket slowly descended. And presently his feet were in the bucket, his hands were clinging to the rope, and he was being drawn up, up, into the world again, and could hear the rhythm and creak of the windlass—a ravishing music. And now, being within a yard of the top, and hearing a friend's voice calling him by name, he became crazy with eagerness and joy, and thought himself already in heaven, until he saw a hand thrust over the well's brink, and the hand held a knife, and the knife began gently, gently, sawing at the rope that supported him. He fell. The world of light became a distant star; dark water engulfed him; silence surged back into his ears. But with

the terror of the fall he woke, to remember Celia and the face of her scorn. And to shut out that sight, which was so much more terrible than any nightmare, he tried to fight his way back into the country of dreams, and dozed, and woke, and dozed, and woke again. And now, at each waking, Celia came to him with love in her eyes ; and he, knowing himself mocked, shuddered and shrank from her.

But in the morning the world had a different colour, so that he forgot the blackest of his resolutions and was betrayed into telling something of his story to Brother Raphe. 'I have a mind,' he ended bitterly, 'to marry poor Tisha Bailey, and let another man's child inherit my patrimony.'

'To what end?' asked Brother Raphe mildly.

'To no end,' returned the young man, 'unless we account it the end of me and my hopes. Indeed the project pleases me. I have no other use for my name. Why should I not fling it as a cloak to this poor naked creature?'

'Why indeed?' echoed Brother Raphe, staring sideways at the floor, as was his bashful habit. 'It has a charitable sound, your project. But God looks not only to the act, my son: He reads the heart whence it came. And even I, the least of His servants, can see an inch beyond the end of my nose, Jack. Let me see if I cannot tell you your true motive. It is in your mind, perhaps, that by means of what the world will count disgrace you may revenge yourself upon Miss Humphrey. Hearing of this she will know, you tell yourself, to what a pass

she has brought you, and in that knowledge will suffer. So argue those weak souls who, in such a case as yours, lay impious hands upon their own lives. By dying thus, they say, I shall force the world to see how much I have suffered, and shall make those that wronged me writhe in remorse. That is the sad logic that seduces 'em ; and I think it is this arrogant self-pity and this malice, more than the fatal act itself, that earns damnation of heaven.'

Marden shrugged his shoulders. 'You have shrewd eyesight, sir, and cool judgement. But, with all respect, you are a stranger to love. I have suffered a gross humiliation. I am humbled to the dust, and there's nothing left me but to make a meal of it.'

'The remedy for humiliation is humility, Jack. Or so I read the matter. A truly humble soul knows its own worth, whether in good fortune or bad. It is your proud man alone that can suffer humiliation ; for pride is the cloak of a fearful heart. Forgive me if I am sententious : I speak only in love of you.' Marden answered nothing, and after a long silence the priest said shyly : 'Are you still inclined to marry Tisha Bailey ?'

Marden was already ashamed of that intention, and wished to forget that he had entertained it. 'Then is there nothing I can do but sheepishly kiss the rod ?'

'Alas, how can I advise you, Jack ? I am, as you say, a stranger to love,' said Brother Raphe, his eyes twinkling. 'But if you would indeed have

counsel of this stranger, I would humbly suggest that you marry Miss Humphrey.'

Marden stared in indignation. 'You are pleased to joke about it.'

'Do you not love Miss Humphrey?' persisted the priest.

'What has that got to do with it?' asked Marden sulkily. 'She does not love me. That would seem to settle the affair once and for all.'

'Forgive me, Jack, and be patient. Remember that I am speaking of something that lies outside my province. I cannot advise you in this difficult matter.' His voice trailed off into silence. But presently, as if gaining hope, he remarked casually: 'All I dare say is this: that if I were a young man in love, and my lady had first taken me to her heart and then for a seeming trifle cast me out, I should not believe too readily that she no longer loved me. And if I found myself, one fine February morning, within a day's ride of her, I should not waste time discussing her with a prosy old priest, who, of necessity, could know nothing of the ways of women.'

Having blandly addressed these remarks to a particular square-inch of carpet, Brother Raphe slowly raised his eyes and smiled at his young friend with an air of apology. His innocent gaiety of heart was infectious, and Marden, with sudden emotion, ran to him like a boy and clasped his arm. 'Sir, you are goodness itself. You make me ashamed. And I believe you may be right in this. I do indeed.

She loved me two days ago, and if I can prove myself innocent she may love me again, why not ? ’

‘ Resolve that she shall,’ said Brother Raphe, ‘ and I’ll wager she will. But never mind about proving your innocence, Jack. That can come later if come it must. Ask her forgiveness first ; and if she loves you, as I believe she does, all will be well. Woman is a sealed mystery to me, as to all men ; but I remember to have heard it said that a woman will forgive a man anything except his being in the right when they quarrel. Be ardent, Jack, ardent and sudden. And if she deny you, do not hear her. As for your innocence, that can wait till after the wedding.’

‘ Heaven bless you,’ cried Marden fervently, ‘ I’ll go now and bid her name the day. No, I won’t. I have a better plan still. I’ll name it for her and take no denial.’

Brother Raphe’s eyes widened in wonder, and his plump face became rosy with admiration and goodwill. ‘ Why, what a resourceful fellow you are, upon my word ! ’ he exclaimed. ‘ I wager she’ll never resist you.’

But Marden did not hear this prophecy, for he was already gone.

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CHAPTER 11

A SECOND WOOING : CONTAINING FEW WORDS BUT OF MUCH MOMENT

WHILE Celia Humphrey, in a trance of misery, went woodenly about her household duties, supervised her domestics, listened mechanically to her father's talk, and told herself that she had done with men for ever, a horse called Tarquin, the best in the Marden stables, carried his master swiftly towards her. To be riding so gallant an animal gave Marden a sense of exhilaration and power, which, added to the new hope that beat in him, made him feel irresistible. On fire with love, and with a kind of glad fury goading him, he had already persuaded himself of success ; and this persuasion endured until the moment when he found himself entering the drive of the house at Fedrum. There, a trembling came over him, and he wondered at himself. How came I here, and what am I doing ? She does not love me : I had best go back. But Tarquin carried him on : and here the drive ended, here was the house, and here, within ten yards of him, was Celia herself, returning from a walk, with her favourite dog, a large black retriever, following at her heels. His heart turned over in his breast ; hope worked a dire agony in him ; but suddenly, with anger, he recalled her scornful face

of yesterday, and so at last went forward gladly and sternly as to battle. She was not yet aware of his presence. She walked slowly towards the house; and because the world was empty, the fair sky a mockery, the sunlight cruel, she looked only on the ground, and told herself, for the twentieth time, that she would never see that presuming wretch again; nor wanted to, since it was clear that he did not truly love her.

‘Good morning, madam!’

He was dismounted; and Tarquin, knowing his manners, trotted quietly away in the direction of the stables.

Celia turned and stared, for a moment unbelieving.

‘So you are back?’ she said.

How cool she is, he thought: a bright sword, finely tempered. But he smiled grimly, and bowed.

‘I am back.’

They faced each other with bright angry eyes. From the house came the sound of a gong, militant, challenging, rousing to battle.

‘Why have you come?’ she asked.

‘I have come to tell you, my dear, that everything is arranged and we are to be married at once, you and I.’

Her cheeks reddened; her eyes flashed. ‘You are impudent, sir.’

‘I am resolved, madam.’

Her eyes became brighter still, and her mouth trembled. ‘It is very civil in you, Mr Marden, that you take the trouble to inform me of my future,

since it seems I am given no voice in the matter.'

He was silent.

'So I am to marry you? And at once, I think you said?'

'At once.' He stood his ground. 'That is,' he added, sadly conscious of the anticlimax, 'next week, on any day of your choosing.'

Celia laughed. 'I am glad,' she said, 'that we are permitted to dine first. Shall we go in, Jack? My father will be waiting.'

FULL CIRCLE

CHAPTER 1

COWMAN SHELLETT'S MYTH, AFTER A QUARTER OF A CENTURY, IS SEEN TO BE FLOURISHING

ON one of a milliard spinning spheres, and perhaps on one alone, a small bright cone of consciousness thrusts its few inches above the vast rubble of Dark and Void. It has endured for but a moment in the cosmic scale, but that moment is the history of life, and for ourselves it is as full of matter, and as unimaginably long, as for a sentient atom would be a moment of ours, who, standing midway between these immensities, and compounding them, stars and atoms, into one metaphysical brew, make our small doomed selves the measure of all things. In Marden Fee the clock of our century records a new quarter ; and Time, in that fraction of a moment, has been busy at his work : graving new lines on the faces of men and women, writing his story beat by beat in their hearts, and bringing to birth, for an extension of the chronicle, new souls, new worlds, a living palimpsest. Man too, in whom the wolf ravins and the peacock struts, is more of darkness than of light ; but in his apprehension of time he cannot but excel his brother beasts ; and his memories, though brief, are at least more enduring than theirs. In this, and perhaps in a certain cunning, Cowman Shellett, for

example, differs from the cattle he has care of. A jest will make him slowly grin, if it be broad and gross enough ; a bit of horseplay may even make him laugh aloud ; and the proximity of his wife, Tisha, may rouse his appetite at any season, and will unless another appetite happen to distract him. In these activities he differs conspicuously from the beasts of the field. He is now in his fifty-eighth year : cadaverous, hungry-eyed, and habitually stooping. No greater contrast to him can be imagined than his host at this moment, for Mr Bailey is now a hale old man, white-haired, genially self-important, comfortably rotund, yet with a look, sometimes, of wistful expectancy in his eye. He has never thought very highly of his son-in-law, and often wishes he could be fonder of his numerous grandchildren ; but neighbourly is neighbourly, as they say in Marden Fee, and Shellett is an honest fellow and has made an honest woman of Tisha : an honest woman and a very weary woman, hard put to it to keep a vestige of her handsomeness and a spark of her former good temper. Seth Shellett, her eldest, is here now, taking his mug of ale with the rest. (He is Squire Marden's gamekeeper, and though Tisha rejoices in his good fortune, she often wishes he were back at home in her overcrowded cottage instead of at Maiden Holt.) Old Mykelborne is here, a venerable white-bearded figure still ready to invoke the authority of Postle Paul. But brisk Farmer Broome is dead these many years ; Roger Peakod was taken by the press gang on his

nineteenth birthday and has not been seen since; and Gipsy Noke, now a substantial patriarch, comes to this tavern no more, having, with his flocks and herds, his sons and daughter, and his wife Jenny, established himself firmly in the valley region called Nightingale Roughs, which lies on the further side of Glatting Wood and well beyond the parish border. Noke of Roughs, indeed, is so prosperous, so remote in spirit from his former neighbours, that he has become already something of a legend; and the story of how he was once rough-handled for taking Jenny Mykelborne to bed before he had taken her to church, is one that gets little credit from the younger men. And it makes the improbable boast no easier to swallow that Cowman Shellett, when loquacious in drink, will vouch for the truth of it, and add how he himself, with more impunity, got his mistus with young Seth a full fi' month afore the wedden. In his younger days he formed the habit of talking about it. 'Ay neighbours,' he would say, 'I tuk un to the ruten-plain a full fi' month afore, and got my Seth.' 'Ah,' say the youngsters, 'you was a countable good wencher them times, Tahm.' 'So I was,' says Tom, grinning bashfully into his beer-mug. 'And naun so slow these days, tellee.' In such talk, less by Tom Shellett's design than by happy chance, was born years ago a myth highly congenial to his self-esteem. And today that myth flourishes.

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TIME had done his work so cunningly that few of these folk were aware of what he was at, or paused to consider his ravages upon their persons. They felt themselves to be much the same as ever: that is, neither young nor old in any intimate sense. Such terms were applicable to other people, but hardly to oneself; and one did not notice how the point from which age is measured had insensibly shifted with every passing year, so that, whereas to Seth Shellett a man of thirty was middle-aged and a man of forty almost an old man, to Richard Mykelborne the state of being seventy seemed the only natural and normal state, and all other ages in man a matter for some surprise. Mykelborne was only just beginning to observe changes in himself. 'Every year,' said he, 'do tell the tale, Tahm Shellett. Every year past senty. Three score and ten, as Postle Paul do put un. I can't make a coffin the way I could. Nor dig a grave nuther.'

'And what call have you to goo diggen, Mus Mykelborne, when Eddie Green be sexton?'

'I'll tell thee, Tahm Shellett. The way of it be this way. Sexton Green'll dig you a pretty grave, so's you'd not wish a better, when he's a mind to. But he ha'nt gotten his heart in his work. And whatsumdever thy hand findeth to do, do it willen and hearty, says Postle Paul. Gird up thy loins and run to ut, and Devil take the hindermost, says he. Up betimes, Tahm Shellett, is up betimes. And lyen abed be no sech thing. Tis uncivil, says I, in man or boy, to keep a carpsse waiten, the same as

Sexton Green ud do, did I leave he to his sinful marnen slumbers. For a dunnamany times I've taken the spade from his hands, in a figure of speaken, and fashioned so snug and sleek a grave as you'd be blithe and proud to lay in, and many a better man wud be.'

'And if Parson were late for the burial,' put in old Mr Bailey, 'I wager you'd preach as good a service as any, Dick, let alone make the coffin and dig the grave.'

'You may say so, Mus Bailey,' agreed Mykelborne. 'You may say so in sperrit and in truth. For didn't it fall out so t'other day, as near as no matter? Ten or fifteen year agoo, when they small pox carried young Nat Broome away, and Parson come sidling up the High Street along of us, yawnen and rubben the sleep out of's eyes, and who've you got in there, says Parson, with a nudge. Where, says I. In the hearse, says he. Who should us have there but the carpse, says I. Plague take ye, says Parson, what be carpse's name, says he. Well, Reverence, he've done wi' names, says I, nuther marriage nor giving in marriage, I says, but Nat Broome was his name afore a died, and Nat Broome he'll be buried by. Nat Broome, says Parson; why, I dint knaw a was dead. Dead or not, says I, we be agwain to putt he in. And it's a dunnamany times crossed my mind to wonder, Mus Bailey, what poor Nat thought of ut up in heaven, and whether he took and had a good laugh with the Lord about ut. And if you ask me what do us poor miserable sinners know of

heaven, I'll tell ye I've been there, and I've been there twice.' His eyes opened wide with wonder and self-importance and he paused weightily, that his words might take full effect on the audience.

The door opened and the summer evening flowed in, mellow and golden and warm. From where he stood Mr Bailey could see the shining road, the tall church, rolling hills, and a patch of luminous green sky; and it seemed to him to be a picture of the happiness he had never had and was forever foolishly expecting. He wondered whether death might bring him to his heart's desire, but had no mind to go by that gate; for though old he was vigorous and full of health, still able to enjoy a fireside talk with his cronies, still liking to think himself a thinker, and still capable of turning out a couplet or two in which to crystallize his thoughts. Since his wife's death, five years ago, there had been more time for such indulgences. There had sometimes, indeed, seemed to be too much time. The house was a strangely quiet place nowadays: it contained, no matter what noise you made, a continuing silence: a backcloth for the queer unexpected drama of memory. Mr Bailey had Tisha's twins, his two dull grand-daughters Mary and Kate, to look after him and the house, and to help in the taproom when necessary: an arrangement as convenient to himself as to their harassed mother. They were quiet and devoted girls, and so ludicrously alike that young Hugh Marden, the Squire's son, had once remarked, in his impudent fashion, that if you tumbled the one

twas even chances the other would be brought to bed of your bastard. Mr Bailey himself had signalized the occasion with a gentler jest, and following his example most patrons of the inn addressed each of the girls as Mary-Kate. The folk of Marden Fee were fond of their joke, no matter how small and slight a thing it might be; and the more often they heard it the better they liked it. This one, already mellow with age, seemed to hold for them an inexhaustible treasure. Anyhow they were good girls, mused Mr Bailey, and staring at that distant country of the sky he thought of heaven and wondered if poor Sarah were indeed up there, bustling about with a broom and setting everything to rights. But his musing was interrupted by the entry of an old man, who had paused for an instant, a black silhouette, in the glimmering rectangle of the doorway: a small human figure sketched in, vivid and dark, against Mr Bailey's vision of the world beyond.

'God-a-mercy,' said Coachy Timms.

A chorus of genial grunts made him welcome, and into the inn with him he brought an ageless gaiety of heart that infected everyone. Most of all did it infect the old ones, Bailey, Mykelborne, Shellett, who, if not often aware of being old, were always, in the presence of Coachy Timms, aware of being made young again: whether by force of contrast with his vast age or because new-kindled by his quenchless spirit, they did not pause to consider. Here he was, the wily old sinner, with

his slim body and large head, his ripe rosy cheeks and candid blue eyes, and the topheavy air that made one marvel to see him balanced so featly on his pins. He was so old that no one knew his age ; and he talked so much gammon that no one troubled to call him a liar when he spoke of bygone centuries with the air of having lived in them. He was a rare old fellow, they said, and that contented them ; and they could see for themselves, the elder folk, that but for an extra wrinkle or two round mouth and eyes, and sometimes an enhanced remoteness of manner as though this world of children fatigued him, Coachy Timms seemed not a day older than he had been at any time during these past twenty years. Sometimes they would ask him his age. ' You'll be long in years now, Coachy, I'll 'low. Getten on to a hundred, bainta ? ' ' Hundred ? ' says Coachy, with a boy's shy smile, ' Ay, I be a hundred right nough. ' ' And a bit besides haply ? ' they suggest. ' A bit besides, shoont wonder, ' says Coachy. ' I were that or more the day Master Hugh's granfer fell into carp pond farty year agoo. Parple in face a was when they dragged un out, and his poor wife, Master Jack's mother that was, was all bewildered to see un. ' There was clearly nothing material to be got out of a man who dealt like that with a plain question ; and the catechism always ended in sagacious sighs and happy laughter at the thought of old Squire Marden and his purple face. So Coachy, for all they knew or cared, was as old as the earth and as enduring : indeed, though

reason might have suggested that he must be near his end, nothing would so much have astonished Marden Fee as to be told that he had at last paid the inevitable debt.

And so with good heart Mr Bailey returned him his greeting. 'God-a-mercy indeed, old friend. You'll be taking a pint of mild, I'll 'low?'

'Ay,' said Coachy. 'A pint'll do to start wi', Mus Bailey.' He winked and smiled and contrived to look innocently anxious. 'Tis not the last pint you've got, be ut?'

This joke was as old and mild as the ale itself, and hardly less to the general taste. Mykelborne told it to Shellett, and Shellett repeated it to Seth, so that everybody in the company enjoyed it three times over. Mr Bailey and Coachy himself, having tasted it in silence, exchanged a smile that testified to its unimpaired flavour. And finally, to make all safe, the old man summed the matter up.

'Nay, not the last, God send. 'Twould be a martacious sad thing to drink up he.'

When this, too, had gone the rounds, Mykelborne resumed his story as though it had never been interrupted. 'Yes, neighbours, I've been to heaven twice, tellee . . .'

'And I've been three times,' said Coachy, not to be outdone.

'The first time tis in a manner of dream I goo,' said Mykelborne. 'And the second time tis a sart of swoond or trance same as Postle Paul did suffer on the road to some place or t'other, as it might

be Glatting City. The first time tis in the church-litten, and I be setten on a toomy-stone, same as you, Coachy Timms, be a-setten on that bench. And while I be setten there and thinken of this and that, of the folks lyen dead abroad me and of whose turn twill be next to be putt in, there coom a trumpet blowen in the sky, a long shinen trumpet from here to Glatting City, and a man's head begin poken up out of the grave I was setten by, and then the shoulders of un, and the broad hams and kicken legs. How do Dick Mykelborne, says he. And he do stand up in his bare body bright as a warmen-pan, and start picken the marl off his thighs and shanks. Seems he've grown a great head of yellow hair in the grave, and a bright beard bristlen out of him, so's he do look like The Rising Sun at Medlock. But he bain't no Rising Sun, neighbours. He be old Jaanathan Tribe, that twisted old scrap of a fellow that was almost my first carpse, and there he be standen straight on his legs and tossen the hair out of his eyes like a lion in the Holy Book.'

'Never old Cobbler Tribe!' exclaimed Mr Bailey in wonderment.

'The same,' said Mykelborne firmly. 'And how's Mus Tribe, I says. Seems us be dead, says he, and in heaven. And the next I do know, us be floaten across the grass, and there a-front of us, setten on our green downs, neighbours, be a parcel of blessed angels. Hugy gurt baastards they be, twenny feet or more from crown to anklebone, and some of 'em as black as a coal. They sets there

on they downs, never sayen a word to no one, a long row on 'em stretchen away round the sky, from here, as it might be, to Squire Hewlett's at Dyking Corner . . .'

'Black?' said Mr Bailey. 'I never heard before of black angels.'

'Black,' insisted Mykelborne. 'You've haply never heard tell of sech, Mus Bailey, because you be an ignorant sinful man same as I were till I did goo to heaven and take a look at un . . .'

'When I did goo to heaven,' said Coachy Timms reflectively, 'twas on Lubin's back I went. A rare young colt were that one, with some pretty mischief in's eyeball. A took me along a winden road and brung me to a green valley the very spet of Hinchley Bottom, but it worn't Hinchley Bottom; and as like as two hedgyhogs to Nightingale Roughs, but it worn't Nightingale Roughs nuther. What place be this, Lubin? This be heaven, says Lubin, and us be in ut, says he. And with that he ups on his front legs and canted me into the grass, and so I set quiet thinken ut over, when what should I see but a young woman standing t'other side of a liddle river. Slim and brown she were, and bright as a marigold, and never a stitch on her; and she smiled across at me cool and quiet as you please. Eh, Tahm Shellett, you may cackle, my geck, but I dint think a thought of bawdry that time . . .'

'How so?' asked Tom Shellett. 'Not a stitch on her, saista? I'll 'low she were game for ee.'

'Not a thought of sech did I think,' repeated

Coachy, 'no more than when a man do watch a flight of swallows or a filly nuzzlen her dam. Come here, my coney, I says; come here, my dimple. But nay, quod she; you maun cross the water to find me. So in I goo splash . . . and then I were back in my bed.'

Intent on Coachy, the company had no attention to spare for Seth Shellett; and he, as became his years, which numbered but twenty-four, kept a bashful silence. Nor could he indeed have told his thoughts, which were, at this moment, tinged with a perplexing radiance. He was tall, fair, awkward, and rather sullen-looking. His mind moved slowly. But, slowly or not, it was moving now in an unexplored country. Coachy's tale, with its chance allusion to Nightingale Roughs, fired a train of bright images in him. And the sudden splendour made him so lose touch with his surroundings that he even forgot to drink his ale.

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CHAPTER 2

NIGHTINGALE ROUGHS, AND OTHER MATTERS, INCLUDING THE BIRTH OF CHARITY

HARRY NOKE was both tough and in his fashion gentle. As a young man he had been more ready to take hard knocks than to give them, and in the matter of love he had always been indolent and easy rather than voracious. Whatever came his road, whether a fine day or a willing woman, he took and rejoiced in, and thought no worse of himself for it. Indeed it was not his habit to think badly of himself. People liked him, and on the whole he agreed with them, in so far as he thought of the matter at all. Resourceful and vain and energetic, he was also generous and thoughtless and very ready to let the morrow take care of itself. But the morrow would not, it seemed, take care of two pregnant young women without his help ; and Marden Fee, as we have seen, was not slow to express its dissent from his too sanguine philosophy of life. This dissent found a various and a forcible expression. Threats, blows, a ducking, the pillory, a shouting mob pelting him with offal, and a dead cat tied round his neck : these were cogent arguments, and their general drift was not to be mistaken. He saw that he had made a mistake about his fellow-men and

that friendliness was a fool's policy. Released from the stocks, he dragged himself back home and lay down to rest ; and after a long terror-haunted sleep he rose in the early dawn, and began dismantling the hut that had sheltered him for five years and the smaller hut that had sheltered his horse. An hour or two later, having loaded the wagon with his goods and chattels and the wreckage of his home, he drove off. Since the road he intended to follow must take him through the High Street, scene of his humiliation, he carried in the wagon, within easy reach of his hand, a loaded fowling-piece, which he was resolved to use against any man that offered to oppose him. He was a little mad, and more than a little murderous ; and, though this first fury burned less fiercely as the days went by, it was never extinguished ; for from that moment he counted every man his enemy and every woman easy and treacherous. It is hardly too much to say that six hours in the stocks had made a new man of Harry Noke : punishment had achieved its sublime purpose.

So in the bleak beginning of that cold January day this new-made man came to his journey's end. Nightingale Roughs was as wild as its name : an unfrequented wilderness sloping down from Glatting Wood and up to the strip of level heath that skirted the northern flank of the little rural town called Glatting City. It was a region deserted and all but forgotten ; primitively wild, full of rank growth ; a no man's land between Marden and Glatting that had never, within living memory, suffered taming

by sickle or plough, though rumour said it had once been used as a sheepwalk. Lying a full two miles from the track between Fee and City, it now lived its secret life unmolested by man. In effect, though not geographically, it was remote from both places, and the outcast therefore chose it for his own. Here a man could hide his face and nurse his hatred and grow proud in his isolation, always provided he did not perish of cold. Harry Noke had no intention of perishing, and it was perhaps his good fortune that the business of keeping alive occupied him to the exclusion of revengeful dreams. Nature was an enemy more to be feared, and more worthy of battle, than those pesty villagers, whose malice, he knew, had varied directly with their envy of his amorous pleasures. What would they have done in my place, he grumbled to himself. But there were many more urgent questions to be answered. How to keep the cold out of his belly: that was his first concern. He had brought a store of food with him, and some horse-fodder; and he had, to begin with, a sufficient supply of firing. He contrived, as he had done before on Dyking Common, to get some sort of shack over his head before nightfall; and, weary though he was, did not neglect to set half a dozen rabbit-snares before turning in. The horse must share his house till warmer weather came; but, even so, this was the coldest and loneliest night he had ever known, and, being what he was, he could not fail to recall having heard a queer account of this desolate region: how in a

past century a murder had been done here, and how at midnight a dismembered ghost came haunting the scene of its impious enlargement: a bodiless head with wide eyes and streaming hair. And another death was still all too fresh in his memory; for the ill-favoured rogue that had shot the dog Roger was but a few days in his grave. That memory, having been obscured by more recent distresses, now returned with a fresh vividness. Lying cold and wakeful in his dark cubby-hole, with the wind moaning outside and whistling in at a score of cracks, he saw again the staring face of the dead man in the grass: evil, distorted by anger, a livid-grey face with a black ball of tongue pointing out at him; and it flashed into his mind that perhaps all the evil that had befallen him since had been that dead man's doing. His thoughts addressed themselves to this infernal avenger. You coon't get me strung up, so this is what you done. Tain't fair dealing, mate. Tain't fair, tellee. You've no call to come worritten me. I can't fight wi' ghostses, can I now? Almighty and most merciful Father, we have erred and strayed from thy ways . . . But the magic of prayer did not avail, for he could not believe himself in favour with heaven. The evil vision stayed; the eyes stared; the tongue pointed. Go to bed, blast you, and lea' me to mine. God rot ye and hell take ye . . . But curses were no better; and not till he remembered the dog Roger did he get relief from the vile obsession. Good Roger. At 'im, Roger. Bite the baastard, Roger.

Ghost against ghost: twas a rare notion. He laughed at his own cunning. And the dead man rose from the grass and slunk away, with Roger snapping savagely at his heels.

Noke had settled himself snugly at the bottom of the valley, within sight and hearing of a stream. Hills sheltered him on three sides from the worst of the wind's violence; and the trees and scrub immediately surrounding him afforded a nearer shelter. The whole region formed a great natural bowl, broken only on its southern sector by a wedge of open sky. But though the hurricane rushed past him high overhead, many a minor wind came moaning and swirling round the bottom of the bowl to work what havoc it could. Dank was a more dangerous foe, and the exile's first task, after building his shanty, was to dike and drain the small terrace of land on which, following his own precedent, he had chosen to place it. February was a drear month, but the prospect of spring heartened him to endure its asperities. In the long evenings, when darkness drove him indoors, he thought often of his dog Roger. At nights the horse's presence was something of a comfort, but the horse was not Roger. Pride forbade him to wish for a human companion. Already his hair was long and tangled, his face covered with black beard: he had forsaken mankind and was resolved to end his days in the wilderness. March came in like a lion, but his blood was still warm with anger and he went on fighting for his life. In April, despite the imminence of floods

that might destroy all his work, he counted the battle won, and then a new ambition was born in him. He had kept alive, but that was not enough. He wanted to prove himself more than master. He wanted to grow rich and powerful. He had already reclaimed and subdued an acre of this wilderness, but that was far from contenting him. With horse and wagon, and all the money he possessed, he went to Glatting City : a strange and rather sinister-looking man, and as different as can be imagined from the shy, blarneying, soft-speaking young fellow who had come to Marden Fee five years before. He asked many questions and answered none, or answered only with lies ; and before nightfall he was back at his clearing, and grimly satisfied with the day's work, for he had acquired, partly by simple theft and partly by purchase, a horse-plough, a hoe, a scythe, a bushel or two of seed potatoes, wheat and barley for sowing, and a pair of household scissors. Among these articles there was enough stolen property to hang him ten times over, five shillings being the degree in theft at which a thief's life became forfeit to the law. But this did not dismay him : it was a small necessary risk and he took it in his stride.

It was about a week later, just as dusk was falling, that he saw, for the first time, a human creature wandering across his kingdom. His first impulse was to shoot ; his second, more sober, was to hide himself. But, the figure coming nearer, he recognized it for a woman's, and conflict began raging

in his bosom. Was this his chance of vengeance? He stepped from his shelter and strode forward, empty-handed. The woman saw him, threw up her arms, and screamed. She began running, but he was with her in a moment and had seized her. She screamed again.

‘Eh, Jenny Mykelborne. What be you a-doen these parts?’ His voice was cruel.

She became limp and quiet in his arms. He released her contemptuously, and she fell to staring at him.

‘I din know twas you, Harry, in that great beard. You look fair wild, you do.’

He regretted the beard; for he read in her eyes that by his neglect he had made himself an ill-favoured and terrifying spectacle; and, being resolved to hate her, for her part in his downfall, he was angry to be seen at a disadvantage. ‘Nemmind beards, my pigeon. What you doen these parts? Tis late for a good girl the likes of thee to be from home, bainta?’

‘I came seeken you, Harry Noke,’ she answered. And it was true. She had run away from sound of her scolding mother and from sight of her father’s reproachfulness. Being desperate, and because no other man would look at her, she was resolved to devote herself to Noke, could she but find him. And so, when a chance rumour came——

‘Howdee know I were here?’ demanded Noke suspiciously.

‘Folks said.’

He grunted, perplexed and angry. 'And whad you want wi' me?' He eyed her pitilessly, taking note of her shape. To have turned her away would have been a hearty meal for that hungry pride in him. He played with the idea.

'Be you liven here always, Harry? 'Tis a wild spot.' She faced his question. 'I get a middlin dish of tongues every minute of the day from Mother. And Father be always putten the eye on me. So I thought haply you'd let me rest along you. I could work for ee and all manner.'

In spite of his resolve her humility touched him. And that she came in suppliant mood suited his proud fancy. But he did not trust her. 'What should you be stayen for? Nay, doon't start snivellen. Ye're none so handsome without that, tellee.' She turned her back on him and began moving away. 'Eh, you be a bag of fancy tricks, Jenny Mykelborne. Gwain now, bainta? Gwain where?' He knew she had no intention of going anywhere. Nor would he now have let her go, for the idea of human companionship was suddenly a secret bliss to him. He must have someone to talk to, and Jenny would do as well as another.

She turned to him with that rueful large-eyed look with which, as a child, she had so often wheedled her father into obedience. 'If so be you daun't want me any more, Harry, I maun goo home again.'

'Wantee? Why for should I wantee? But I want what you've got in y'r belly, darlen. And that be a son of mine, bainta?' He had need of sons :

lusty lads by whose labour, and by his own, he would make himself great. 'When be your time comen, girl?'

Yes, he had need of sons; and when Jenny's firstborn proved to be a girl he was sorely disappointed, and remembered, with raging bitterness, how, five months earlier, Tisha Shellett had borne his son for another man to play father to. He cursed this unwanted female child; he cursed the mother; he cursed the midwife he had lured with bribes and threats from Glatting City. And with these curses something of the devil went out of him. By now he had built another and a larger hut, leaving the old one to serve as a stable; and before Charity was two years old he was the father of a son and the master of twenty well-cultivated acres. No one challenged his ownership; no one wished to compete with the madman who had secretly set himself the gigantic task of taming this wilderness. He knew in his heart that not till the whole of Nightingale Roughs was yielding profit would he relax his gargantuan efforts; so year after year he went on, adding acres to acres and son to son (two branches of one endeavour), and sparing neither himself nor his wife. After five years of it he hired a lad from Glatting to help him, paying a shilling a day in winter and spring, one and twopence in haytime, and one and sixpence at harvest, with a reasonable allowance of small beer at all seasons. This modest outlay brought him a generous return; the farm increased more quickly than ever. He

employed others and bought more stock. And with every day that passed he grew more cunning in his farmcraft ; for he gave the whole of his quick mind to it. By keeping eyes and ears open he learned many a new device, so that before long he was spreading his land with a mixture of marl and dung, broadcasting seed by means of a newly invented machine instead of by hand, and taking care never to sow turnips before four in the afternoon lest they should suffer drythe. By the time Roger his eldest son was ready to take a share in the work, more than half the wilderness had been conquered ; and, besides valuable grain and root crops, there was pasture for cows, grazing for a hundred head of sheep, a five-acre field of burnet and clover, and of sainfoin a fourteen-acre of which every unit could be counted on to yield three tuns of good hay. Noke was relentless in his industry, suffering nothing to daunt or delay him. In a certain time of disaster when he found himself short of horses, he harnessed a pair of bullocks to the plough, and laughed at the gaping astonishment he provoked : such a crazy thing, they said, had never happened in Sussex before. He was married to his farm and thought of nothing else. His sons to him were so much man-power ; his wife was their mother ; his daughter, for he had but one, was a useful milking and butter-making wench. He hardly noticed, and certainly gave it no thought, that Charity, in her late teens, possessed the same kind of plump seductiveness, and the same willingness to make use of it,

as her mother had exercised upon himself two decades ago. But when she reached her middle twenties a fantastic idea flowered from the darkness within him. He began looking at his sons with new eyes. Man-power for the farm they were—but they were more than that. For he now entertained consciously a thought that must always have lain hidden in him somewhere: that these sons of his were in a sense, and a profoundly satisfying sense, extensions of his own being. He, Harry Noke, the man who had been reviled and pilloried by a pack of villagers twenty-five years ago, had so increased his substance, had waxed so great, that he was now more than a man: he was six men. Those five sons were each a living proof of him: he looked upon them with a sudden fierce satisfaction. But five was not enough. They had all been born in the first eight years, and then—no more. Why? He suspected Jenny of cheating him; and cursed her for it, knowing her to be now past child-bearing. He was crazy to prove himself further, to beget a numerous progeny. Why not let Charity take a turn, said his demon. The thought was quickly repudiated. He shrank from it, and for a moment hated the man his mirror shewed him: a lean, hungry-eyed, crafty old fellow, with a sharp nose, broad mobile nostrils, and a spade of black beard. But it returned at intervals, causing him a twinge of shame. Despite his angry and continuous endeavours, the gentler instincts of his youth were not yet utterly destroyed; and he raged inwardly, being at war with himself.

CHAPTER 3

SETH SHELLETT DISCOVERS A NEW WORLD, AND AN AXE IS FOUND

SETH SHELLETT, waking on Midsummer Day, thought first of Noke's daughter, Charity; and not for several seconds did he remember that today it was his duty and pleasure to tie a green ribbon in his hat, and cut a stick of hazel, and take his part in the year's high festival. In this he differed from most of his neighbours, who for weeks had talked of little else than the coming celebrations. For on Midsummer Day, each year, the folk of Marden Fee made festival. Work was abandoned; authority, with its own consent, was set aside; and the day was dedicated to feasting and the night to saturnalia. Until noon, however, everything was done according to rule and tradition, and of this tradition the Marden Club was the faithful guardian. The club had been founded by Bertram Marden, the first squire of the Fee (of whom only the incorrigible Coachy professed a personal knowledge); but the midsummer ritual it was so zealous in practising was of immemorial antiquity. No one knew, or inquired, when or by whom it was first ordained that on a chosen day of each year the men of that parish, led by a banner-bearer and each carrying a peeled hazel wand cut

from the hedges, must assemble at The Nick of Time, and thence, having answered to their names, march up the High Street in the wake of seven white-veiled maidens, and so to church, where the priest awaited them. Lightly screened by a veil, even the plainest girl looked a little enticing, as the men were not slow to notice ; and there was always a good deal of giggling among the vestals. But by the time the procession reached the church, the women's demeanour was as modest as the men's was solemn. There were wardens at each door to see that no clubfellow escaped his duty ; and few attempted to do so, for the pleasure of defaulting was not worth the risk of forfeiting one's seat at the club dinner. For the most part they sat through the service with a good grace and thought of the feast that was to come, though today there were not wanting those who spared at least enough attention to the admonition to entitle them to say, afterwards, that Parson Hockley were no match for old Parson Croup. ' A good sarment, but he do beat the devil round the gooseberry bush so much, tis all a body can do to keep waken.' Parson Croup had died ten years ago, and his successor, a foreigner from Kent, had the inevitable faults of a novice. ' A middlin raw discourse,' said Mykelborne. ' But I say naun to that, for you can't expect better, seeing he be so new to ut. Festical's not what it was, neighbours. Parson Croup, when he'd a mind to't, would send ye to dinner so full of God's fear as liddle shart of fi' pints would drive un away.

A lamentable pretty preacher was Parson Croup on club days.'

But in spite of Mr Hockley's inadequacy, the men who reassembled at The Nick of Time for dinner shewed no reluctance for their meal. Food and drink was provided on a lavish scale, a pound of beef and several gallons of beer being apportioned to each man. The three casks—two thirty-sixes and an eighteen—made a brave show; and the company responded with a vast blare of applause when Mr Secretary Bailey climbed on to one of them, and, fortifying his precarious balance by resting his right hand on the head of Mr Warden Mykelborne and his left on that of Mr Warden Sweet, with a modest preliminary hem called for silence. When the uproar had subsided, and the orator's mouth was seen to be filling with the first word of his speech, Mr Bellman Growcock, the blacksmith, rang his bell fiercely and shouted: 'Silence, gennelmen, for Mus Sikkitary!' At this the applause was renewed, and Mr Bailey had to wait again. But, during this chant of praise, those who were most eager for their meal began shouting for order; Mr Growcock rang his bell a second time; and silence was at last restored. 'Gentlemen and fellow clubfellows,' said Mr Bailey, 'we are all assembled together once again. Another year has rolled past, season following season in its appointed turn. Last year is gone, and this year is with us, and our club is the same as ever. It gives me great satisfaction to be able to tell you that we have had

a year giving great satisfaction to all. George Mew broke his leg and received club pay for a period of seventeen calendar weeks. Our old friend and pensioner Willy Brown, his gout has gone from bad to worse. We buried old Mr Thorpe with club money last Michaelmas, and his grateful and refined widow followed him before the year's end. These, gentlemen, are the only outgoings of consequence that I have to report. So we will now fall to, with such inclination as has been vouchsafed to us. And may I remind you, gentlemen, that spitting while at table is against the club rules, and that the practice of throwing bits of fat and gristle at your opposite neighbours is one that has led to a great deal of unpleasantness in the past, such playful sallies being not always received in the right spirit, especially by persons who are a little consarned in liquor. And now, fellow clubfellows,

*Let appetite and provender combine,
And give you satisfaction as you dine.*

'Thank you, gentlemen, for your kind attention.' But he was not yet suffered to descend from the eminence of his barrel. For, first, Bellman Growcock must draw a pint, and offer it to him with the ceremonial words: 'Mus Sikkitary, sir!' No one was permitted to drink until Mr Secretary had begun. 'And do pitysake drink a sup with no more words, Mus Bailey,' added Growcock, in a hoarse hurried whisper, 'for tis all I can do to

keep 'em off it, tellee. Like a parcel of snorten lions they be.'

With this request Mr Bailey hastily complied, and the chained lions were let loose. A roar filled the room, for these hearty fellows somehow contrived to shovel food into their mouths, and gnaw it and swallow it, and yet maintain a continuous and noisy conversation. Mr Bailey came in for a little criticism for not having mentioned that old Jarge Mew, that had bruk his leg, had for many years been the club bannerman, a very high and responsible office, his duty being no less (and no more) than to carry the banner at the head of the procession from tavern to church. The appointment of a successor to Jarge had been the occasion of many an anxious conference among the seven elders of the club: the secretary, the two wardens, the bellman, and three other committeemen. 'We maun get a steady man,' said Mykelborne, 'and a God-fearer. Tis a bright and costly bauble, our banner; and twould never do to trust he to the hands of a blasphemious rogue the like of Bellman Growcock here, or some such another, nor yet to a gummut the like of Tahn Shellett.' They had all, including Growcock himself, wagged their heads in solemn agreement; and these conferences had borne good fruit, for it was agreed now, by connoisseurs of the art of banner-bearing, that the man on whom their choice had fallen was making a very fair job of the business. 'What say you, young Seth Shellett?' But this was mere banter, a rhetorical question; for it was

notorious that Seth, sitting mumchance at the feast, would never let himself be coaxed into expressing an opinion on anything. Yet he was no fool, they said, or Squire Marden would never have him for gamekeeper.

‘How be they birds of yourn, Seth?’

‘Middlin bad. They’ve got the spasms, most on ’em.’

‘Ah, have ’em? And what says Squire to that?’

‘Squire dunnaw everything,’ said Seth, without a smile.

‘Ah, Squire dunnaw everything, daun’t a?’

‘No, a daun’t.’

In Marden Fee old jokes are best. Seth’s interlocutor winked at his neighbour. ‘Hearkee what Seth do say? Squire dunnaw everything, a says.’

Delighted chuckles from all sides.

‘And what of Parson, Seth?’

‘He dunnaw everything nuther.’

Roars of laughter.

From down the table a fresh voice joined in. ‘What daun’t a know, Seth?’

‘What daun’t who know, Mus Thatcher?’

‘What daun’t Squire know, Seth?’

Seth munched on in silence for a minute and a half. The conversation went on without him. Then he said: ‘I dunnaw what tis Squire dunnaw.’ After a pause he added: ‘But a dunnaw everything, stands to sense.’

Laughter was renewed. Growcock the black-

smith then took the matter up. 'I know one thing Squire dunnaw. He dunnaw the games young Master Hugh be at wi' Noke's darter.'

'And what be they?' asked someone, with a sly grin.

Seth stared at his plate. His face slowly reddened. The things he heard moved him with a strange variety of passions. But they did not shake his resolve to go to Glatting Wood after drinking his fill; nor, when he had effected that much of his purpose, and was waiting by the tree where Charity Noke had promised to meet him, did their recollection diminish the ardour of his expectancy. That was talk, but this was real. Hugh Marden might or might not have done this or that: it mattered little. What mattered was that soon, unless she intended falsely by him, Charity would be in his sight and hearing. And what else? He attempted no conjecture. Late afternoon sunlight was sprinkled thriftily about the wood, amid masses of warm-smelling shadow. He took little enough notice of that, but it cheered and helped to excite him. Nothing as yet had passed between him and Charity beyond a few shy words and glances. Nothing to the point had been said. But she had agreed, as though casually, to meet him in this lonely intimate place; and ever since then, at intervals, his dreaming senses had foretasted the sweetness of her. She was more like a woman, more to be desired, than any other girl he had seen: that was all he knew, and even that was a dumb instinct rather than a conviction. He did not think

far ahead. Being unread, and in the main unfanciful, the word love, and the conventional vocabulary of love, played no part in his thoughts. He wanted to see and touch her : that was enough.

He heard the sound of breaking twigs and trodden undergrowth, and went forward to meet the sound.

‘Hullo. You’*m* come then?’

‘Hullo.’

He did not speak her name, nor she his. The encounter was impersonal : male with female. She stared at him, her big bovine eyes wide with wonder and amorously mournful, her ripe mouth childishly pouted, the poise of her lush body languid and feline. She was bareheaded, and a clustering mass of black hair framed her plumpness with a suggestion of mystery. After that one word she said no more, but seemed content to stare and wait. The silence worked in him. The shyness he had felt at her first coming vanished away, leaving him free of all constraint, free to escape from himself into the bright sensual world that was opening before him. With a certain deliberation, as if doubting of her real existence, he put an arm about her shoulders. She smiled up at him and stroked his face, so that all his nerves vibrated with delight, and he became radiant with lust, a bright innocent animal. With a little growl he lifted her in his arms and carried her to the nearest covert, where, drenched in green shadow, they lay for a long while, wordless and passionate.

Dreams came crowding. Sometimes Seth caught

himself absent in mind from the woman in whose arms he lay, and had no time to be astonished that this glory, in the moment of achievement, could be so painlessly, and in so rich an oblivion, lost to him. A little scrap of tune came murmuring in his head ; a field of ripe corn floated into his vision. Sheep-bells tinkled on the green downs ; and presently he was driving a plough along the base of a steep hill. The sun beat down on his bare arms with pulsing vigour. The broad buttocks of the mare swayed and plunged ; the muscles of her thighs rippled and swelled ; her tail lashed ceaselessly at the swarm of following flies. From such dreams he emerged from time to time into a waking life that was itself as dreamlike as any of them : woke to find two large eyes, brimming with dark light, shining upon him, and a blood-red amorous mouth near his own. The world and all its meaning lay within the circle of this small cool private place, this sun-freckled green. But with every kiss he tasted again of the lotus, and at last sank into the deep slumber of fulfilment.

When next he woke, he had travelled so far in sleep that he stared with dull eyes, wondering where he was, and at first could hardly believe the tale his memory pieced together. The woman, too, seemed stupid with sleep ; and even at each other these lovers gazed blankly. They moved apart, and sat up. The silence between them persisted. Since their first greeting, neither had uttered an articulate word. Nor did this silence bring constraint : the artifice of speech was still

something less than second nature to them.

It was she who spoke first. 'You be Cowman Shellett's son, bainta?'

'Yes,' said Seth. 'Father be Squire Marden's cowman sure enough.' After a long pause, he added: 'And I be gamekeeper.'

These things were common knowledge, and Seth could not imagine her to be ignorant of them. But he was proud of his position and glad to talk of it. He was not in general a vain man, but he could not help knowing that he was accounted a likelier fellow than dull Tom Shellett. And now he was eager to cut a fine figure in the eyes of Charity. For his attitude to Charity had changed. Suddenly, as it seemed, from being merely desirable, she had become significant, a person. An hour or two ago she had been to him merely woman: now she was his woman. He stole a glance at her, and remembered that tavern talk, and became savagely possessive. He flung an arm about her and clutched her shoulder. 'You and me,' he began. But he broke off, at a loss for words.

She wriggled herself free and rubbed her shoulder ruefully. 'Adone do. Rackon you've give me a bruise.'

'Nemmind bruises. You be my girl. See?'

She giggled, making big mocking eyes at him.

He scowled. 'You be my girl. Dauntee forget. If anyone else come round you, I'll murder un, and all manner.'

'Oh, do adone!' She grinned with delight.

'I *seen* your father, Seth Shellett, up along Glatting one time.'

Seth grunted. He was not interested in his father. 'Gamekeeper I be. Head man.'

'Fancy!' said Charity.

'Used to be ploughman, I did. But I be gamekeeper now.'

'That be tarrible pretty work for ee, I'll 'low.'

'I caught a feller after they birds t'other day. Rackon a won't come again along me.' With his stout hazel wand he began idly prodding at the ground, and the soft leaf-mould yielded to his assault as readily as Charity herself had yielded. It gave him a vague unconscious pleasure to see the hole growing bigger; but his thoughts were still with himself and his woman, for he was waiting for her to ask how he had dealt with the poacher, being very ready to tell her of the fine drubbing he had given that rascal, and how the drubbing was a kindness to him, and a martacious long sight better than the treatment he might have received at the hands of the law. But Charity had quite other thoughts. She liked Seth; she wanted him; she was resolved to keep him for her own; and her remarks were not idle.

But now she was ready to talk of other things than Cowman Shellett.

'Whad you diggen a hole for?'

'Eh?' He was a little cross. He had hardly noticed that he was digging a hole. And, anyhow, it seemed a foolish question, because it was not the

question he had hoped for. ' Rackon a won't come round along me again,' he repeated perseveringly.

' What a tarrible gurt stone you'm got there,' she said, pointing to the hole at his feet.

He grunted illhumouredly ; but, undiscouraged, she leaned forward and plunged her hand into the moist earth.

' Tis a funny shape, annut ? ' she said, shewing him her foundle.

Seth stared. In spite of himself the thing stirred a faint curiosity in him. He took it from her and turned it over in his hand : a broad shapely piece of flint about eight inches long. One end was broad and flat, the other sharp like an axe. Seth stared, not knowing at first what it was that attracted him ; and even when he did know, he hardly knew how to express his thought. There was workmanship in this flint, and workmanship was something that Seth, for all his slowmindedness, seldom failed to recognise.

' Do ee want ut ? ' he asked.

She leaned forward and gave him a large loud kiss. ' You shall have ut, darlen, for a keepsake,' she said, half-mockingly, as though humouring a child.

' He do want naun but a handle,' said Seth. . . . But he did not finish speaking his thought ; for Charity was waiting for more kisses. Idly dropping Ogo's axe-head into his jacket pocket, he turned to her eagerly, and the drums of ancient warfare began beating again in his blood.

CHAPTER 4

MR BAILEY CONSULTS HIS HEART AND HEARS OF SOMETHING TO HIS ADVANTAGE

MR BAILEY, on this Midsummer Day, experienced unwonted difficulty in remembering where he was and what was demanded of him. Club Day was an occasion which he, no less than the humbler members, anticipated with eagerness. To be 'Mr Secretary,' to exercise unchallenged authority, to be deferred to and made much of, to receive confidences and give sententious counsel, these things gratified alike his vanity and his affection. More than ever now, he was a friendly soul; the years had mellowed him, ripening such humour as he had and weaning him from the worst of his nonsense. He was less greedy of notice, less expectant; but he was no less lonely. Indeed he was more than ever lonely in spite of the crowd of memories that companioned him. The sight or thought of beauty—and now all things external were apt to be translated into thought—had all its old power to trouble him with a vague hunger; but he no longer entertained any worldly ambition, and no longer regretted the chances—disasters, as he had once called them—that had made an innkeeper out of a smart self-important young schoolmaster. Marden Fee, to which he

came as a foreigner, had accepted him at last. These villagers trusted him and liked him; looked up to him as an educated man, yet counted him one of themselves; and nowadays, fully realising his good fortune, he found this friendliness a matter not only for gratitude but even for surprise. So Club Day, when old friends, originally of the Fee, flocked in from all parts of the country (some from as far as Medlock, a good twelve miles), meant much to Mr Bailey. He took a paternal interest in these folks, making it his business to know where they lived and how they lived, whether their wives were kindly or shrewish, the number of their children, and the date of their last illness. It pleased him mightily, after years of self-induced difficulty, to find himself at ease with these men and of use to them. When Charley Grampound, an octogenarian, came to him from Dyking with complaints about old Mrs Grampound—‘My wife be sech a tarrible tarker, Mus Bailey, I doon’t lay wud ’er nowdays’—he was by no means at a loss. And when today, after dinner, his own club wardens, Mykelborne and Sweet, being (as the phrase goes) much concerned in drink, came near to bloodshed in a dispute about the true remedy for the ague, it was Mr Bailey who put the matter right and prevented a brawl that would certainly have become a riot. ‘Now tis this way, Mus Bailey. Old Johnny Ague, he’ve bin a-runnen his fingers down my back, and that be for why I carry this liddle nutshell round my neck. I’ve got a spider curled up in he, and old Johnny

daun't like spiders, tellee. Now this gurt booby Dick Mykelborne, he do say a man must swaller the spider. Roll un up in a caabweb and swaller un like he was a pill, says Dick Mykelborne, him and his old Postle Paul.' Giving judgement, Mr Bailey ruled that both methods were good, each in its own way, arguing very plausibly that while some kinds of spider might prove curative taken as a pill (gratification of Mykelborne), others, less edible on account of their size and general aspect, had best be worn dangling, as a preventive charm ('Whaddid I tellee, Dick!' cried Sweet, in genial triumph.) And finally he thanked God that there were no spiders of any kind in his beer today, and if the clubfellows would do him the kindness to fill their glasses again he would venture to propose to them another toast: 'Our trusty wardens, gentlemen. Those two devoted officers of this club who watch your old secretary day and night to secure that he do not abscond with the funds. Which same funds, gentlemen, are in safe keeping, and ready to be drawn upon for the benefit and assistance of any clubfellow that stands or shall stand in need of pecuniary aid. Sickness truly vouched for, injuries honestly come by, these we need not fear to confess, gentlemen. Our club is behind us. But if any man here choose to break his head in a quarrel, tis with his own money he must mend it, for not a groat shall he get from the funds while Erasmus Bailey is your secretary. Our trusty wardens, gentlemen—we'll drink to 'em!'

From all parts of the room there was much 'allowing' that Mr Secretary had shewn his customary skill in handling an awkward situation. But for the rest he was quieter than usual. He seemed absent from them, and the youngsters among them told each other that he was getting old. Had rumour of such talk reached Mr Bailey's own ears, he would have smiled at it with a certain degree of self-satisfaction. For indeed, though he had entered his seventies, it was not age that made him pensive today. The truth is he was listening : listening to a strange and charming tale that his heart was busy telling him : a tale that had all the summer in it except summer's wild lustihood, all the warmth and colour, the green and gold, trees rustling like the sea on shingle, and those mellow evenings of amber and musk that seem to hold eternity itself in their stillness. And the subject of this tale, the beginning and end of it, was Elizabeth Lavender, the comely and comfortable widow who, with the help of a middle-aged daughter, kept the one small shop in the Fee. Mr Bailey smiled benignly on his company, responded to their jocularities and applauded their songs. And when he caught his attention straying, he half-blushed for his thoughts. What nonsense, and at my age ! But his heart answered quietly that the only nonsense in the affair was to pretend that age was so important ; and with this encouragement he began thinking how he could contrive to slip away for an hour or so and go adventuring.

Mrs Lavender would never, as they say, see fifty

again, nor yet fifty-five. But she did not let the fact distress her. She had the incomparable gift of taking life easily, and, fortune having been kind to her, but for that curmudgeonly snatching away of a husband of whom she had been very fond, she had roses as well as wrinkles in her face, had lost nothing of her original plumpness, and was not unaware that her white hair suited her. She confessed to being elderly, but she had never played into the enemy's hands by thinking herself an old lady, although it sometimes pleased her whim to pretend that she did. Her chief disappointment was that her only daughter, Patience, was forty and still unmarried; she could not help thinking that it must be largely the girl's own fault. But now she had hopes even of Patience, for it was something new for that sober drudging woman to go gallivanting out with a neighbour, as she had done this afternoon, to watch the ladies play stool-ball in the Vicarage paddock. She had urged her mother to come too, but Mrs Lavender, besides thinking that Patience could do with a holiday from daughterliness, had reasons of her own for wishing to stay at home this Midsummer Day. She sat in her parlour placidly crocheting, glancing now and again through the window at the sunlit and empty High Street, and telling herself from time to time that if he didn't come it made no matter: twas all one to Lizzie, birthday or no birthday. She glanced now at the clock, which told her that it was two minutes to four. Last time she had looked, it had been five minutes to four.

As the hour struck, her quick ear caught the sound of footsteps coming up the street. At once she became very intent on her crochet-work. The steps came nearer, nearer, and stopped. Someone tapped on the window-pane. Now whoever could that be? And what's the world coming to that they can't knock at a body's front door like Christian people!

'Mrs Lavender!' said the expected voice.

She got out of her chair and moved to the window. 'Why, tis Mr Bailey. How come you to be paying visits on Club Day, Mr Bailey?'

'I've come to see you, Mrs Lavender,' said Mr Bailey. He was rosy with a sense of the occasion. 'I've come to wish you many happy returns of the day, ma'am.'

'Well, that's kind in ye, Mr Bailey, to remember an old woman on her birthday. I'm all alone, today.'

'So much the better,' said he boldly. Then, as if abashed, he added: 'Not that twouldn't be a pleasure and privilege to say how-d'ye-do to your amiable daughter, Mrs Lavender. But it happens I want a word with yourself.'

'Then you'd haply best come in and say ut.'

She eyed him with humorous severity, and the same mischievous gleam shone in her blue eyes when, a moment later, she opened the door to him. He took her hand and bowed over it with much ceremony. Then, with a somewhat schoolboyish air of casualness, he fished a bottle from his pocket,

placed it on the table, and contrived to look as though he didn't know it was there.

'And what be this?' asked Mrs Lavender.

'Oh that?' said Mr Bailey, glancing at the bottle first in surprise, as though he were seeing it for the first time, and then with a certain careless disdain. 'That's nothing. Nothing at all. In point of fact I believe it's a bottle of sherry-wine.'

Mrs Lavender crinkled up her face with pride and pleasure. 'It's . . . it's never for me, surely?'

'Indeed it is,' said Mr Bailey smiling. 'For your birthday, dear Mrs Lavender, with my best respects and humble duty. Ah, but I've something else here. A copy of verses specially written in your honour.'

'Ah Mr Bailey, I never had no head for pottery.' She stared nervously at the manuscript he proffered her. 'I'll 'low tis very elegant verses. And all by your own hand.' The man's erudition intimidated her. 'Please to tell me how it reads,' she begged him.

'With pleasure, madam,' said Mr Bailey. Holding the manuscript at arm's length, he declaimed, not without pomp but with manifest sincerity, a poetical effusion of which some fragments are already known to us:

*Truth will prevail, and may not be deny'd :
A lovely woman is Creation's Pride.
By Condescension, wheresoe'er she goes,
She makes the Desart blossom as the Rose.*

*In Infancy, with artless charms endow'd,
She won our hearts and made her parents proud.
When girlhood bloom'd we watch'd with ardent sighs
While Cupid sped his arrows from her eyes.
The years roll by : behold the Maiden now,
Love on her lips and Candour in her brow ;
Her manners chaste, her bosom free from guile,
And Modesty resplendent in her smile.
O happy he that wins her for his own,
And rules her, and is ruled, by Love alone ;
He sees, and swells with manly pride to see,
The pledge of his affection at her knee.
But Sorrow comes ; for lo, in course of time,
This worthy husband perish'd in his prime ;
And so the Queen must reign without her King,
For tis of Mrs LAVENDER I sing.
The years roll on once more, as roll they will,
But Mrs LAVENDER is lovely still.
Though forty winters have besieged her brow
(As Shakspeare says) she has no rival now.
So hasten, Bailey, ere your sands are run,
To warm your eventide in Beauty's sun ;
With tears and sighs her tolerance entreat,
And pour your heart's devotion at her feet.*

Mr Bailey, not venturing as yet to face his charmer, folded the manuscript and placed it on the table without a word. His self-confidence had suddenly deserted him ; he wondered if he seemed to Mrs Lavender as foolish as he felt. But when at last he ventured a glance in her direction he was both

heartened and touched by what he saw. She was regarding him with shy admiration, and with something of wistfulness. He doubted whether she understood what in his verses he had tried to tell her ; or it may be that she took it to be no more than a piece of playful gallantry on the part of one elderly person to another. Sitting there with her hands clasped in her lap and her eyes gravely wondering at him, she looked lonely, courageous, and curiously young. It was almost as if his florid praises had awakened a young girl in her ; and though she knew his nonsense to be nonsense she wished it might be true. Elderly and wise she was, but would fain have been young and credulous.

‘ Well,’ he said awkwardly, after a long silence—and for a moment she thought he was about to take his leave. ‘ Well, my dear—what do you say to that ? ’

‘ ‘Tis wondrous, I’m sure,’ she answered, with a smile. ‘ It do fair terrify me how you think of such things, Mr Bailey.’

It was so sweet a smile, so delicate and fragrant, and for all its youthfulness so richly mellowed by the years that had gone to its making, that Mr Bailey forgot himself and his embarrassment and became a lover.

‘ You’re a very distracting creature, Mrs Lavender my dear, and you must please marry me. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. When you smile like that, I can’t bear the thought of leaving you even for a minute. Bless my soul, I’m in love with ee, old

as I am. And that's the sense of the matter. Come,' he said urgently—for she was staring in silence at the floor—'make up your mind to it, my dear. For I won't leave this house till you say yes, so I warn you.'

It was evident by the way she looked up at him now that she was in no mood to say No. But, before surrendering to the happily inevitable, she must make her protest. 'Tis nonsense, Mr Bailey. I'm too old for marrying and such. You'd better go find a young woman to wed.'

'That's what I'm doing this minute, ma'am,' said Mr Bailey. 'That's what I'm doing and that's what I've done. You're all the young woman I want. I could have fathered you pretty near, if I'd been quick. You'll be foolish, I'll 'low, to take an old fellow like me, a young woman in your prime as you are, and I'm not saying I deserve you. But don't talk to me of younger women, for if you'll not have me I'll have none.'

He gazed at her crossly : so crossly that she was provoked to mischief. 'Won't you ? Don't be in haste, Mr Bailey . There's many a likely one that ud have you. My darter Patience now. She's but turned farty a month since. She'd make a good wife, I bluv.'

She was laughing at him, and Mr Bailey knew that there is but one answer to that. So he bent over her and took her by surprise (or so he flattered himself) and gave her a hearty kiss. 'Jump up, my dear, and let me sit down.' He lifted her out of her chair, sat

himself in it, and pulled her on to his knees. 'Now I'll have no more fandangle from you, mistus !' said Mr Bailey, holding her very tight.

She nestled comfortably against him. 'What a stonishment twill be for Patience,' she murmured, half to herself. 'Her own mother and nigh sixty. Tis a shame for you, and so they'll all say. But there be one good thing—Patience must have my shop, but I'll bring ee a well-filled stocking, Mr Bailey.'

'I hope and trust,' said Mr Bailey naughtily, 'that you'll bring me two, my dear.'

'Mercy, what a style to talk !' she protested. 'Tis a stockingful of money I do mean.'

'But I'll 'low you've a fine womanly pair of legs,' he cried, dropping joyously into the vernacular. 'And them's all I look to find in stockings, mistus.'

She lifted her head from his shoulder and looked down at him with mischievous solemnity, pretending to be offended by his freedom. The next moment they were laughing together ; and when they had enjoyed their joke to the full he announced his resolve that they should be church-cried the very next Sunday. 'What d'ye say to that ?'

She nodded ; her eyes shone ; her cheeks marvellously dimpled.

'Why, you're nothing but a bit of a girl after all,' cried Mr Bailey in delight. And with a smile that matched her own, in its bantering tenderness, 'I'd haply do better to look round for a grown woman,' he added.

CHAPTER 5

CHARITY, ARMED WITH A NEW WEAPON, RETURNS TO THE HOUSE OF NOKE

A LITTLE before dusk, Noke's daughter went home from Glatting Wood feeling highly satisfied with her day's work. She had lived so long in the shadow of her parents and their unremitting industry that this new life, the life of personal conquest, was exhilarating beyond anything she had ever dreamed. She was intoxicated with a sudden sense of her own beauty and power, and scornful of those dullards at home who had never noticed this queen moving among them. Others had lightly flattered her, and some had gone further than flattery; but it had been left to Seth Shellett to awaken, and in the same moment fulfil, the woman in her, the wolf of hunger and the lion of pride. Hugh Marden had been well enough in his way, and at first she had thought him wonderful. A gentleman, the Squire's own son, with elegant manners and a flow of fine talk, he at least provided a very pretty feather for her cap. But, after all, he was little more than a boy, younger than herself by years. Moreover he was only amusing himself: a girl who had sharpened her wits against Harry Noke's could not fail to see that this young gentleman would never lose his heart to her,

however ardently, in fits and starts of enthusiasm, he might court her favours. She had indeed learned much from Master Hugh and her pride had suffered not a little at his hands. The growing realization that he held her cheap, something between a passion and a plaything, had filled her with dismay, with resentment, and finally with a lust to find someone who would admire her as much as she admired herself. And now she had Seth and was enchanted with him: with his strength, his taciturnity, his unexpectedness: and above all with the woman she saw in his eyes. For, however much he might be lacking in the airs and graces of gentility, he was (she vowed) a man to make two of Master Hugh, with whom, moreover, she always felt inferior. Seth was slow and sudden and surprising. His tongue-tied sheepish pleasure in her and his dullness of mind, and then the sudden masterful desire that could make a god of him: these, by their contrast and alternation, kept her in a continual delight and terror. By his silences, and by his rough impetuous handling of her, he told her what she wished to be told with an eloquence that Master Hugh, with his half-playful audacities of speech, could never hope to command. The worship in his face enraptured her; his flame of animal exultation shone out upon her and burned her hunger away. And if he was so different from Master Hugh, he was more different still from her dour industrious brothers. That he was perhaps himself 'a sort of brother'—for Harry Noke made no secret of having begotten him—made this

differentness of his all the more enticing. The relationship, or its possibility, did not dismay or deter her, except when she thought of her father, of whom she had good reason to be afraid. A month ago, Seth Shellett had been a stranger to her ; now he was a lover. He had never been a brother, and she could not regard him as a brother now. The tale her father told of him was probably no more than a trick for making her mother angry, a mere parcel of lies ; and, if not, tis no consarn of mine, thought Charity.

Not till she came within sight of home, and saw the red gabled roofs of the farmstead grouped harmoniously in the valley below her, did she remember that she had broken her father's law, blasphemed his gods, by absenting herself from the farm without having obtained, or even so much as asked, his leave to do so. Until now that knowledge, that guilt, had lain coiled and asleep in her mind. To a heart less burdened by misgiving, Noke's Farm would have seemed at this moment a spacious, comely, and heartening spectacle. This region was still called the Roughs, and to the outside world was still an almost legendary land ; but of its original wildness nothing now remained. Charity, breathless with running, hurried down the great hillside between a field of good grazing, scattered with sheep, and a five-acre crop of beans whose warm sweetness came breathing into her nostrils. On the hill opposite her, the hill that slanted up to the broad heath of Glatting, she could see the haymakers at work ; and in the valley fields that lay between, corn

was springing. It was a farm well-tended, and cunningly worked: a picture of bounty which revealed to the eye no hint of the sweat and drudgery, the mad industry and ruthless coercion, that had gone to its making. Only we who can remember what Nightingale Roughs once was, and who know that this change has been accomplished by but one human will controlling seven lives besides its own, can gauge or surmise at what expense of blood and spirit the miracle has been accomplished. That is a tale that cannot be told, nor needs to be. It is enough that in Harry Noke, or in the demon of undeviating energy that rode him, Nature had met her match. Her match and her mate; for the union between Noke and his farm was like a marriage of proud antagonists, strength with stubbornness, creative anger with grudging fertility: a marriage marked by resistance and rape, yet, despite all quarrels, fruitful, intimate, and exultant. Of this tumult, this amorous warfare between man and earth, the tranquil scene told nothing. It was serene and beautiful, a harmony of quiet colours, mellowed by the summer evening, sweetened and subtly quickened by summer's scents and sounds: the savour of bedewed grass, the chirpings and rustlings of belated birds. The farm and the farm-buildings draw the eye to the centre of the picture, where it is content to rest. Not yet old, but weathered by sun and rain and received of them, and so already made one with their surroundings, they body forth, in their extent Noke's power, in their grouping and

design his singleness of purpose. Built for utility, at the behest of a man who has had a mortal quarrel with beauty, they have the austere grace of their own integrity. Here, if anywhere in the world, is an untroubled peace.

But to the hurrying girl this familiar world wore a different aspect. The sight of the haymakers accused her. They were still at work, and at this late hour—the whole family of them, her parents and five brothers. As she reached the yard she met them returning, her father last of all. That meant that they had finished the tedding without her; for, though dusk was fast gathering now, the light would have served for a while yet, had there been work left still to do in the hayfield; and it was not Noke's way to make an end before he must. The youngest and favourite of her brothers, a lad of seventeen, came sidling up to her.

'You'd do best to goo to bed afore he catches ee, Cis. He be in a fair taking, I'll 'low.'

The advice was well-meant but impracticable. There was no time for escape. Noke had already seen her, and so, frightened though she was, she made shift to put on a semblance of courage. And by acting courage she seemed to acquire it, for she suddenly felt powerful and cunning, and a sly secret smile lay curled like a cat at one corner of her velvet mouth. She became bold in the knowledge of her beauty. I'll soon wheedle un to a good temper: twon't be the first time. Bythen I've done with him he'll be soft as a lamb with me,

He came and stood before her and stared with dumb menace, like a dog ready to spring. The boys lingered near the house door in an uneasy group : she could hear the occasional scrabble of their boots on the stone step. Her mother, still and watchful, stood a few paces in the rear of her husband.

Charity met her father's stare unfalteringly. But the smile left her lips, and her eyes grew big and mournful and childish. She was a picture of lovely forlornness.

'Well !' His voice was curt and quiet. 'Where you bin all day ?'

'I be tarrible sorry, father.'

'Where you bin ?'

She was conscious that her mouth was turning down at the corners in a way that in earlier and happier days had seldom failed to disarm his anger. She was on the point of tears. 'I only bin for a walk, father. 'Tis Festical Day in the Fee.'

Noke spat on the ground. 'A pox take it ! What's the Fee to you ?'

She did not answer. Her tears were postponed. She had expected a scolding, perhaps a clout or two, but not a catechism. She was unprepared for searching questions.

'Where you bin ?' asked Noke again. 'Where ?'

'I bin to Glatten Wood.' Surely, said her eyes, Glattling Wood is harmless enough. 'For a walk, that's all.'

'For a walk, hey ?' he sneered. 'A walk on your back, I reckon. Who's bin wud ye then ?'

The shock of this insult made the girl drop her childish airs. She was now a world away from tears. She was a woman, proud and indignant. Her face flushed deeply; her eyes narrowed, shining with hate; and there was contempt in the curve of her set lips. She offered no answer.

Noke came nearer and repeated the question. He spoke in a lowered voice, suppressing a fury that must sooner or later find vent in violence. This quietness in him was terrifying to the girl, but she concealed her terror.

‘D’ye hear me, girl! Who’s bin wud ye, I say?’

Her nostrils dilated with excitement; her breasts were fluttering. And the sight of his daughter’s ripe charms seemed to feed the man’s rage. ‘Answer me, you sly slut!’ he roared, with dreadful suddenness. Charity was now speechless with fear; her resolve not to answer was fortified by incapacity. He came a step nearer, and stretched out twitching hands towards her. ‘Get inside and upstairs wud ye, by God! I’ll have the skin off your back!’

For a moment, after this outburst, both father and daughter stood rigid, as though a judgement was suddenly come upon them. A new voice spoke, Jenny Noke’s, unwontedly bold and caustic.

‘That’s enough o’ that tark. Thrash the girl, willie? Ay twould please ye, sure enough. And strip she first, I’ll ’low. Nay, Harry Noke, tis me that’ll bannick my darter when she do need ut. You leave her be.’

With an oath he turned on this obtrusive woman

and made as if to strike her. But she faced him squarely, and he hesitated. His arm dropped slowly to his side. 'Ay, you'd stand up for 'er, I bluv. She've a bly of her mother about her, that's sartain sure.' But he spoke with his gaze on the ground, for an obscure guilt troubled him, and the ugly satirical gleam he had seen in Jenny's eye was the eye of his own conscience. His speech died down to a grumble of oaths, and shrugging his shoulders he strode into the house, his sons shuffling aside into two groups to make way for him.

Charity stared and gasped : gasped for relief and stared her astonishment. The world was overturned ; for never before had she known her mother rebuke their lord with impunity. With her admiration of this exploit mingled a small complacency, for she vaguely felt, without in the least understanding the sensation, that she herself had somehow contributed to her father's defeat. Me and mother can manage un, she thought. That sly smile curled back into its corner, and her heart gushed with sudden warmth for her mother.

'I'm tarrible sorry, mother,' she began coaxingly—

But Jenny was in no mood for soft words.

'I'll mind you, madam, there be a dunnamany cows want milken afore you takes bite or sup. Better goo fetch they in.'

The five sons of Noke stood watching and listening. Not one of them had uttered a word since their father's accost of Charity. And now, still silent, they filed like wooden men across the cobbled

yard, and, reaching the further side, scattered in search of more work : all but the youngest, who paused by the cowsheds, thinking to serve his sister. The cows had crowded to the yard gate, and were massed there, like looming shapes of fantasy, with their horns branching black against a banner of green sky. As the sound of his sons' steps dissolved into the shadowy distance, Noke emerged from the house carrying a storm-lantern, and went stamping in their wake, sparing no glance for his women. He too became gradually merged in the surrounding gloom. The echo of him faded in the ear like a vanishing memory ; but the passage of the lantern through that quiet cool place seemed to have brought darkness where formerly there had been only a gossamer dusk ; and the women's faces grew vague to each other and their voices unearthly. ' Whad you standen there for ? ' said Jenny Noke. ' I'll give you a middlin bunt prensley, if you daun't look sharp. Get away along then, and leave y'r father be.'

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CHAPTER 6

OF THE NOTHING THAT HUGH MARDEN BROUGHT
HOME WITH HIM, AND WHAT BROTHER RAPHE MADE
OF IT

HUGH MARDEN, having stabled his horse and washed the blood from his face, strolled thoughtfully, and a little furtively, across the garden of Maiden Holt, towards the spot he most favoured : a lower lawn hidden from the house by trees and commanding on its west side a sweeping view of downs and sky. His upper lip was swollen and bleeding, and at every five or six paces he stopped in his walk to dab at the wound with a handkerchief. He was in some little pain, and his head buzzed, but he was too angry and confused in mind to pay much heed to his physical condition. On any less equivocal occasion he would perhaps have allowed his mother to lave the bruised lip, and she, as she had done a hundred times in his childhood, would have scolded him (but without conviction) for running into danger yet again. But he could not face, at this moment, either her kindness or her inevitable questions. And, until he had had time to invent an explanation, his sisters were even more to be avoided. The elder, Ann, being his friend, would perhaps be hurt if he refused her his confidence ; and this was

emphatically a story he did not wish her to hear, despite her proved capacity for keeping a secret. As for Clare, she was a mere child to him, being but seventeen, and his junior by four years. So, anxious not to be intercepted or called back, he hurried out of sight of the house and made for the lower lawn, and in particular for the little arbour his father had had built there ten years ago. He had all but entered this place when he observed that it was already occupied. Lying back in the chair, with eyes closed and features seraphically at rest, was old Brother Raphe. A book lay on the small rustic table within reach of his hand should he elect to sit up; and a dove, which for the last few weeks had adopted him for companion whenever he was outside the house, sat perched on his shoulder. Man and bird, in such a setting, presented a spectacle almost fantastically serene to the startled eyes of this young man, who half-smiled at the irony of the contrast it suggested to him. There was a momentary bitterness in his smile, but the bitterness quickly passed, leaving only wonder and affection, tinged delicately, as always, with amusement. No one could see Brother Raphe without an impulse to smile: it was not that he was a figure of fun—though if you chose to see him so he would have led the laughter—but that when he was most happy he had the air of sharing his happiness with you as though it had been an exquisite and beatific joke, as perhaps it is; and even in moments of gravity or grief the light in him burned steadfastly. He was now nearing

his eightieth year, and made no secret of enjoying the fact that at last, after years of suspicion and disfavour, all the village was his friend. The new vicar, unlike Parson Croup, found nothing to disapprove of in him, and much to be grateful for; and these two, despite a great disparity in years, and despite their being in opposite ecclesiastical camps, were often together, quarrelling amiably on points of doctrine, playing chess, capping each other's quotations from the ancients, and discussing local politics. Until recent years he had been much seen in the village, but now he was grown feeble and never went beyond the confines of Maiden Holt.

But the young man wasted no time in contemplating the sight before him. He gave one glance, made an alarmed grimace (which hurt him confoundedly), and turned away. His steps were noiseless on the grass.

'Well, Hugh?'

Young Marden hesitated. He was in no mood for talk, as we know, and for an instant he entertained the notion of pretending not to have heard that suave voice. But his posture, his pause, had betrayed him.

He glanced back over his shoulder. 'Hullo, sir! You awake? Hope I didn't wake you.' He waved airily and was for going on his way.

'I wasn't asleep, my boy. Or, if I was, twas only a cat-sleep. Come, don't run away. You're not in a hurry, are you?'

Seeing no help for it, Hugh now turned fairly

round; but still he thought to keep ten feet of greensward between himself and this genial inquisitor, hoping that so, perhaps, his swollen face would escape notice.

'Well . . .' he said, as if nicely considering this question whether or not he were in a hurry. 'Well, I had thought, as a matter of fact, of putting in an hour's pistol practice. But . . . anything I can do for you first, sir?'

'No, Hugh, no. Except tell me how you came by that bruise of yours.'

Hugh went very red, but seeing no chance of escape he resolved to submit with as good a grace as he could muster. He forced a laugh, and came within a more sociable distance of his companion. 'Oh, that's nothing. Like a fool I walked into a tree, and got the worst of the encounter. Where's my father, sir, that he's not with you?' Before Brother Raphe could speak—his articulation was slow nowadays and a little painful—Hugh had rattled on, answering his own question and asking another. 'Why, of course, he's attending the Court Leet this morning, aint he? I wonder he has the patience to listen to all those fellows, upon my word I do: with their talk of crops and rotations and who shall have this strip of commons and what Farmer So-and-so shall be permitted to grow on that one. 'Twould put me out of humour in ten minutes, I promise you. But my father seems to enjoy it, for he gives more time to such matters every year; and they're saying in the village that he's himself the best farmer for

fifty miles round. Do you think tis true, sir, or no more than a toothsome dish for the Squire's son to sup of ?'

Brother Raphe fixed the young man with an ironical eye. 'My dear Hugh, you cannot doubt I love your father dearly ?' he asked.

'Why, no, sir. I've never doubted it.'

'Then can you believe, too,' asked Brother Raphe, 'that, despite my love for your father, I'm far more concerned at this moment to hear about that so recently acquired bruise of yours than to talk of his farming ? I'm an inquisitive fellow nowadays, but I'm old, Hugh, and you must humour me, as you'd humour a child. Indeed I insist on it.'

*From Infancy to Age is but a span,
And Age reveals the Infant in the Man.*

I'll wager you never met those lines in your reading ?'

'No, sir. Whose are they ?'

'Their author is Erasmus Bailey. He's been a prodigious poet in his time, and the other day he did me the honour to lend me a parcel of manuscript.'

'What ! Our innkeeper ?'

'Our innkeeper, and my very good friend. I first made his acquaintance—why it must be twenty-five years ago, when his poor daughter got into trouble. But you wouldn't remember that. You ere not with us at the time.'

Hugh was delighted of a chance to keep the conversation going on neutral subjects. 'Bailey's

daughter? That will be the cowman's wife, won't it? What was her trouble, sir?'

'Well, tis over now,' answered Brother Raphe, 'and your bruise, my boy, is only just begun, by the look of it. You walked into a tree, I think you said?'

Hugh, reddening again, grunted a half-hearted affirmative.

'Now that,' said the old man meditatively, 'is an exceedingly unusual event. And, but that I would not seem to lack compassion, I should be tempted to congratulate you on the privilege of so rare an experience.'

'Rare?' Hugh smiled uneasily. 'Rare, or not, tis sufficiently tiresome.'

'I see you are sceptical,' said Brother Raphe. 'But I hold to my opinion that for a man to bruise his face by walking into a tree is a comparatively rare event. You are not to be blamed if you suppose that it must often happen, since in woodland regions, copses and forests and the like, trees are to be found in great profusion, and men frequently walk among them. Nothing, on the face of it, seems more probable than do such collisions; yet I am persuaded that in fact they seldom occur. Providence, for its own inscrutable purposes, defeats our expectations. Indeed I would go so far as to say that for every case you find me of a man bruising his face against a tree, I will engage to find a hundred in which the injury is similar but the cause quite different. There are, for example, the various bruises and abrasions received

in hand to hand fighting or common fisticuffs. They alone constitute a very numerous class.'

Hugh stared moodily at distance. 'Your eyes are too sharp for me, sir,' he said after a silence. 'I see you've guessed the truth. But you don't know the whole story, and I'll wager you'll find it too fantastic for belief.'

'We shall see,' said Brother Raphe with a smile.

'Positively, sir,' said Hugh, with a false air of jauntiness, 'I've been involved in a brawl with one of our own servants. The fellow had the insolence to strike me, and I was forced to fight him with my own hands. As it happens I was able to thrash him, having science on my side. But it is a grossly humiliating affair: pray let us talk of something else. And you will understand, sir, that what I've told you is in the strictest confidence.'

'Perfectly,' said Brother Raphe. 'And from that I infer that you yourself intend to be silent. You do not, for example, intend to ask your father to dismiss this insolent fellow that struck you?'

Hugh's jauntiness collapsed, but Brother Raphe continued to gaze at him with bland innocence. 'I see what you mean, sir. You mean I'm not being quite candid with you, and you're right. The truth is, I owe my bruises to a woman. This fellow—he is her lover, it would seem—came suddenly upon me when I was talking with the wench, and promptly accused me of having debauched her.'

'And you denied it?'

'I denied it,' agreed Hugh. 'It was true,' he

added, turning his face away, hot with shame, 'but I denied it.'

'Well, well . . .' said Brother Raphe mildly. And after an unhappy silence he went on: 'Since I am not confessing you, I must crave pardon for my importunity. Sins of the flesh are grievous, my son, but Holy Church in her wisdom does not always hold them mortal. That you have toyed with the happiness of a woman far beneath you in station is a graver matter, a breach of trust. But let us speak of that another time, as between penitent and priest. First I will finish your story for you.'

Hugh's face was still averted, and he made no answer.

'In my fancy,' said Brother Raphe, 'it runs somewhat in this fashion. You, for the woman's protection, deny the charge; but she, being a less ready liar, or for some darker reason of her own, betrays herself. And so you come home with a bruised face, and confide, however reluctantly, in a too inquisitive friend. Is my conjecture a good one?'

'It is so near the truth,' said Hugh, 'that I begin to think you a wizard.'

'God forbid!' said Brother Raphe. 'See,' he cried, with a smile, 'you've frightened my dove away.' He sat up in his chair and peered round in search of the bird. But the effort was too much for him. He sank back again, a little wearily; and at the same moment the dove returned, alighting on the dazzling greensward, just beyond the shadow of the arbour.

‘ You’re not feeling ill, sir ? ’ asked Hugh, in some concern.

Brother Raphe, opening his eyes, smiled reassurance. ‘ A little drowsy, that’s all.’

‘ Then I’ll leave you.’

Brother Raphe lifted a hand as though in benediction. The dove fluttered into the air, circled twice, and came to rest on the uplifted hand. From its beak dangled a marigold, at sight of which the old man smiled with sudden amused pleasure. ‘ That’s a pretty thought, brother,’ said he. ‘ And now, by your leave, I’ll take my siesta, so God be with you till I wake.’ He lowered his hand gently, and the companioning dove, dipping and curving and rising at last in flight, bore its bright flower into the sunlight and was lost to his view.

CHAPTER 7

THE HILLTOP, THE VALLEY, AND THE FIVE BROTHERS

FROM the hour of his first decisive meeting with Charity, love had wrought so rich a ferment in Seth Shellett that the world was now transformed for him. Not for the first time, but for the first time with conscious excitement, he saw the sky squandered above him and life springing green at his feet. He was released, in part, from the lethargy that had made him stupid ; the earth of him was broken up, and the pulsing light of his being became one with the energy of all creation. He heard the thunder of the universal tides and knew them for his own : knew, not with his intellectual parts, which worked as sluggishly as ever (and so had not the skill to mud a clear emotion with sophistical invention), but with senses tempered fine by desire. This desire had once seemed simple and specific enough ; but with every day that passed it grew in power and subtlety and range, as a flower, rooted in earth, discovers to sunlight the pride of colour and lyric of form that have lain secreted in her seed. He moved, at blessed intervals, in a country of new marvels and new terrors. Charity was the core of his life and the sum of its meaning ; and nothing could content him now but complete and public possession of her.

After the brawl with Hugh Marden—an incident that was like to have driven him from the Squire's service and to ruin, but somehow, unexpectedly, did nothing of the kind—he had flung her fiercely away from him, thinking himself cheated. But the same jealousy that drove him from her pulled him back : he wanted her, could not withstand her, and found himself unable to endure the possibility of her finding a new lover to replace him with. So he sought her again (she was not hard to find) and wooed her again. At first she pretended she would have none of him, being eager to regain her ascendancy, and liking the taste of power that such punishing of him yielded her ; but at last, fearing to resist longer, she allowed herself to be coaxed back into his arms. The rapture of this reunion—for now she gave generously, and seemed to give all her heart—was enriched by a hundred shades of feeling that had been absent, or unperceived, in the wild beginnings of intimacy ; for it was an experience radiant with recognition, and quickened and complicated by the quarrel of which it made an end. This hand he touched, this warm mouth, was her hand, her mouth : her very self was in them, and her self, at the lightest contact, flowed out like liquid fire to join with his.

And so, inevitably, his mind turned towards marriage. This was ambitious in him, and only the extreme of love would have encouraged him to cherish such a scheme ; for though in his humble way he was a likely fellow, and had had the luck,

while still young, to step into the shoes of an older man, he could not think himself good enough, by worldly standards, for the daughter of Farmer Noke of the Roughts, a man notoriously rich and powerful, and of a proud and ugly temper. Seth did not flatter himself that his suit would meet with favour in that quarter ; but, though the fact disquieted and baffled him, he did not for a moment allow it to shake his purpose. Far more grievous an obstacle, in his estimation, was Charity's evasion of the question, and her discomfort when his persistence made evasion impossible. The merest mention of marriage was enough to make her unhappy and petulant. Yet Seth was for ever mentioning it ; and she knew, and he knew she knew, that the moody silences into which he not infrequently lapsed were filled with this obsession of his. Sometimes when she had begged him, with anger or with tears, not to worrit her no more about it, he would sit for half an hour without speaking : not vengefully, or to punish her, but because his mind could not leave its one idea, and, if he must not speak of that, only silence was left to him.

Now, once again, he began. 'When'll us get married, lovey ?'

'I dun naw,' said Charity.

They were in Glatting Wood again, sitting side by side in the green bower they had made their own. This was now their regular resort ; and neither of them saw any reason for changing it. Charity had told Seth next to nothing of her father's outburst against her, being by nature secretive, and with him

deliberately so. Since that night of storm a brooding silence had settled upon Noke's Farm. There was a queerness in the air, and a problem. But Charity gave no thought to it, having more immediate problems to engage her attention. She was resolved not to lose her rich prize : whether by deception, or by open revolt against a tyranny too long endured, she must keep Seth for herself and see him as often as might be. In the event, she had encountered fewer obstacles than there had been reason to expect. But for the lamentable episode of Hugh Marden, the way had been made easy for her. Noke made no allusion to the affair of Midsummer Day, though it was clear that she was unforgiven. He avoided looking at her ; and never spoke to her except to command, and that but rarely. Charity, partly as a matter of policy, but more from industrious habit, was as zealous and thorough in her work as she was casual and impudent in her absences. Jenny by her silent acquiescence encouraged the new freedom : it may be that she liked the house better when Charity was not there to share it with her. And Noke, nursing an obscure grievance, bided his time.

Noke bided his time and laid his plans ; and madness crouched in him, ready to spring. This evening he was in the smaller of his two hayfields, loading and hauling. The bulk of his hay had been harvested a fortnight since, but, bad weather intervening, and other affairs pressing for attention, this field had been left over. Three of his sons were with him, but the youngest was elsewhere, and the

eldest, for the third night in succession, was climbing the slope that led up to Glatting Wood. Noke, in the valley, gave as yet no upward glance : nor, had he looked, could he have easily discerned the figure of his emissary moving in the shadow of the hedge. All four men seemed lost in their work : the father on the wagon, loading ; the sons leading the horse round the field, from heap to heap, and with their pitchforks plying him like hodmen with great faggots of hay.

‘Dauntee *want* to get married then ?’ asked Seth plaintively.

‘What boots wanten ?’ parried the girl. ‘If us can’t, us can’t.’

‘But why can’t us ? I be gotten good money, good enough. And there be the old gamekeeper’s cottage waiten and ready. It’s bin empty ever sen a took and died.’ He put his arm coaxingly round her shoulders. ‘I knaw Squire ud let me have un, did I but tell him I want to be married. He be countable good to me, be Squire.’

‘Not after what you done to Master Hugh, he won’t.’ At this wanton renewal of an old and bitter dispute he became angry, and she eager to mollify him. ‘Nemmind, Seth. Marry or not, tis all one to us, bainta ? I do love ee eversmuch.’

As always, he found her coaxing irresistible. She was adept in this art of hurting and healing, and so by amorous provocation escaping from an argument. Now, with Seth’s arms about her, and Seth’s kiss on her mouth, she forgave, and he forgot, his tedious

talk of marriage, and both became lost in a region beyond time. There they remained for a long while at peace, and Noke, glancing up from the valley, saw the figure of his spy emerging from the wood. He grunted, and shaded his eyes that he might watch the more closely. The fellow was hurrying, but what else? Ah, now he stopped, and thrust a hand into his pocket. The next moment he was waving a red scarf. A sharp exclamation escaped Noke, half anger, half exultation. He called his sons. 'Come along then, and sharply.' The wagon was half-loaded: it was inconceivable that work must stop: the men looked at their father with blank faces. 'Leave that, tellee.' What of the hay? 'Leave that.' What of Dinah the mare? 'Leave Dinah, blast ye! Come wud me.' He was already striding away in the direction of the red sign. The three sons trailed at his heels, and their young brother, looking over the stable-wall and seeing them go, snatched up a sharp-bladed shovel and raced out of the yard.

Unminded of her father, Charity was examining with admiration the new toy that Seth had contrived for himself. To the flint axe-head, which they had found in this very spot on the first day of their love, he had attached a wooden handle. The work had occupied many a spare minute during the past few days, and he took a boyish pleasure in the result. The handle was about two feet long and curved slightly at the grip end. It had been lopped off a stout stake, stripped of its bark, planed and rubbed smooth with sand, and finally oiled; and it was

bound securely to the axe-head with thongs of leather. Altogether it was a job that any boy might have been proud of. 'You gurt baby,' said Charity fondly. Then she kissed him and asked what use it was, when there were a dunnamany good axes already at Squire's, and he confessed, with a diffident grin, that it wasn't much use at all: yet could not forbear to add, in defence of his whim: 'But he do cut owdacious sharp, lovey, seeing he be only a bit of stone.' In witness whereof he jumped up, and led her from the covert, and bade her watch; and swinging his axe made a murderous slash at the trunk of the nearest tree. The bladed flint bit laterally into the wood and lodged there, so that his grip slackened. 'Looke there,' said Seth proudly. 'Dang me if tain't stuck in the tree and all manner!' Here was triumph indeed. He let the axe stay, and went back to Charity's side.

His arm about her, they stood without speaking, and seemed to listen to their own chiming thoughts. They were done for a while with kissing and embracing; the intoxication of touch was spent; and now, perhaps more intimately than ever before, they were turned towards each other. Man's greed and woman's trickery were for a moment of small account: the hour was golden, and the spirit of the hour was beauty. The day was ebbing about them, and dusk, though scarcely perceptible as yet, was beginning to fall. Nothing of sunlight remained in the wood but a spray of bronze on the higher branches, and a spattering of rust on the

ground. The warm hum of summer, which had brimmed this silvan world all day with a luminous and dazzling sound, was now diminished; and the lovers, when they had finished speaking, became suddenly aware of the gathering silence.

CHAPTER 8

HOW ONE MAN AND FOUR MEN FOUGHT IN GLATTING
WOOD, AND OF THE DARKNESS THAT CAME UPON
THEM

WE are the children of Koor and of others innumerable ; divided from them only in illusion, by a trick of time ; joined, with them and with each other, not by metaphor, but by an unbroken physical continuity. On the stream of our common blood, the lusts and terrors and aspiring dreams of Koor are carried into us. His impulses lurk and prowl among our labouring thoughts ; his ignorance defeats our little knowledge ; his cruelties, fruit of his fear, distort the face of our wisdom ; and his gods, though we repudiate them or miscall them by comfortable names, loom on our dark horizons. He and all who came before him, and all who have followed him, are no more than cells in a vast multiple organism, the copious fermentation which is Man. They are lives generating from one immortal sperm.

Here, for an instant, we see three atoms of that life joined in conflict. The lovers stood quietly hand in hand ; and Noke was with them before they had time even to take alarm from the noise of his coming. Charity gave a little shriek, and Seth

stared in dumb astonishment at the strange creature confronting him: its sharp bright eyes, bristling beard, sneering mouth, and its posture rigid, like a stretched bow, with the tension of a controlled fury.

From this nightmare apparition there issued a voice startlingly quiet.

‘So I’ve found ee, have I? Come you here, girl.’

Charity clung in terror to her lover.

‘D’ye hear, miss! Come to y’r father.’

Seth flung a protecting arm round the girl and wished for a weapon. He had courage and strength, but the ugly and sudden force of Noke’s personality shocked him. This adversary had an air of madness; his malice was coiled like a snake ready to strike; and in the smoothness of his speech was treachery. And now, all too visibly, dusk was invading the wood.

‘Come you ’ere,’ said Noke again. ‘And you, boy—take y’r hands off her. Me and darter want a liddle tark together, daun’tus, deary?’

Charity, at sound of this endearment, raised her head and looked uncertainly at her father. He grinned with hatred, and she despaired of charming that hatred out of him. Her eyes widened to make room for the welling terror of her heart. Dared she risk all by flinging herself at her father and entreating his mercy? Would the softness of her arms about his neck, and the throbbing anguish of her young bosom, wean him from his anger? Unable to answer these questions, she clung to Seth still, her strong faithful Seth. He would not let this ogre kill her.

‘I be waiten, darter,’ said Noke, in a kind of whisper.

Seth broke into troubled speech.

‘You ha’nt no call to be wild with her, Mus Noke. Me and Cis wanta get married, sir. I’ll treat her praaper, gogzoons I will, Mus Noke.’

Noke came a step nearer. His right hand held a cudgel.

‘Come you here, Charity Noke. I’ll not ask again, mindee.’

The movement fired in Seth a train of fear. ‘Draap that!’ He unfastened the girl’s grip on his shoulder and pushed himself in front of her. ‘Us daun’t want a belvering then, do us?’ He spoke mildly, in a tone of friendly persuasion.

Noke, snarling, came at him with the cudgel. But the boy’s stillness seemed to disconcert him; for he did not strike. ‘You’d best get outa my road while you may,’ said he. ‘I’ll have a word wi’ me darter first, I bluv. And settle with you prensley, me fine lubber.’ But, seeing the young man standing his ground solid and stupid, he raised his cudgel again and struck out savagely. But the target moved and the violence of his assault pitched him forward; and Seth, having stepped aside, drove at him with a fury equal to his own. The blow caught him on the ear and filled his head with a thunder that presently dissolved into a monotonous singing; his fall was heavy, and when he angrily tried to raise himself there came so sharp a pain in his left ankle that he sank back again and in a loud

voice cried curses on the world. There was dew already fallen, and the freshened earth gave out a rich smell. His hands were sticky with sap from the bruised grass. The world rocked about him. There was thunder again, and voices speaking in the thunder; there was a crack in the sky, a zigzag scarlet crack from which, as he watched, blood came dropping down, and he shut his eyes and felt its warm plash upon his sweating face. He was lying alone in a dark hut, and the thunder was the thunder of galloping hooves, and the voice the voice of a horseman. A dead face stared at him from the grass. He fell on his knees; a wooden yoke was made fast about his neck; and there, at a little distance, the eyes and lips of a young girl mocked and allured him. And when presently he came to himself, and to Glatting Wood, and to the memory of all that had befallen, he wondered what had become of his daughter Charity, for whom he had set this snare tonight. He raised himself cautiously on one elbow and took careful stock of his surroundings. Not knowing that all his phantasmagoria had flashed past in an instant, he was astonished to see the young man still within a yard of him. To be powerless, and at this young man's mercy, even for a moment, made him choke and cough and spend himself in curses. But the young man paid no heed to him. He, too, was looking to see where Charity had hid herself. And at that moment he saw, not Charity indeed, but a man creeping towards him from the shadows. A man stalking him; and there,

another. Having no weapon, he turned to run. Two other faces confronted him. He was surrounded by the sons of Noke.

In this extremity there flashed into his mind the thought of Ogo's axe. Two paces brought him to the tree; and his hand sought and found the projecting handle. His enemies were in no hurry: they approached with a stealthy relentlessness. He heard Noke yelling: 'Catch un, lads! Catch 'em both, and truss 'em up.' And the eldest of the sons closed in upon him. The sudden rush took him by surprise; and, having no room in which to swing his axe, he thrust it savagely at the hostile face. The clutching hands relaxed their grip, and the man staggered back with a scream. Two others were within a yard of Seth, but now he was shouting with the madness of battle and his weapon had free play. A third man leaped upon his back, caught at his throat, and struggled to disarm him. The two fell backwards; other bodies came hurtling upon them. A writhing mass of bodies, a many-headed monster, heaved and plunged upon the ground, kicking with its ten legs and growling with all its mouths. But even in this tangle of ferocity Seth somehow retained his weapon; and presently, as it seemed by a miracle, he had wriggled free of the mass and was running this way and that, uncertain of his ground. He was victorious so far, but he had still to find Charity; and now they were at him again. The foremost man came recklessly, blind with animal rage. Seth's axe caught him on the jaw. 'Lay hold

on un, can't ye ! ' cried Noke. ' By cripes, if I'd a pair of legs I'd shew ye ! ' But the man with the smashed jaw fell and lay moaning in the grass, within a few yards of his wounded brother ; and the two that remained standing seemed for a moment daunted, unwilling to come within reach of that murderous axe. Seth, now swollen with the gross pride of his victory, was ready and eager for them. ' Come on then,' he cried. ' Come and take un who can. Come on then, my brave cockies, and daun't be so countable shy. Rackon tis wenches you'd rather be fighten.' His slow, loud, mocking drawl had more than a hint of Noke in its quality ; and Noke, even in the height of his impotent anger, pricked up his ears, recognizing a kinship of spirit. For an instant he came near to admiration of this young crowing fighter, and lusted the more bitterly for his defeat. Again he urged his sons to it, but they still hung back, muttering and grumbling. ' Better see to y'r father,' drawled Seth contemptuously. ' I rackon he've catched hurt. And y'r brothers too, seemingly. Go along then,' he added, more friendly. ' I'll not bite ye again till ye beg for un.' But now, having time for reflection, his mind was busy with wondering where Charity was. To find her : that was the next thing. With all his heart, his angry exultant heart, he wished she were at his side, to crown and share his triumph. She was his prize ; he had fairly won her ; and now he was resolved that nothing should cheat him of possessing her for his own. No one could stop him : not her father, not

her brothers, not all the world. The world indeed would be with him, for these Noke men were notoriously queer: savage, industrious, secret in their ways, regarding all their neighbours with suspicion. To snatch the girl from such a home—and a fine sweet girl, as anyone could see—would be held a right and gallant thing; and her father's opposition would count for nothing. She was old enough to choose, and she would choose him, Seth Shellett: he made no doubt of that. She was in his blood, and he in hers: they were already mated, and lacked only that blessing of the church which Parson Hockley would gladly pronounce, and Squire Marden benevolently approve (for Seth knew himself to be something of a favourite with both). Fighting had roused all that was masterful and sanguine in his spirit: he was a different man from the slow-minded ineffectual fellow who had been pleading with Charity only a few hours before. He was glad that his love had been discovered, so that henceforth he could move openly and irresistibly to his heart's desire. 'Ay, you daun't trust me then, be that ut?' He was feeling much friendlier now, ready to forgive everybody; and in this new mood it hurt him a little to see that while one of the unwounded sons was bending over his fallen comrades, the other still warily watched their dangerous quarry, as if expecting a new attack. Seth, returning the stare, said no more. He had something to say yet, to the old man: but twould be time enough for that when he had Charity safe. He ached now for the sight and touch of her.

A boy's clear voice rang out behind him.

'Lookee here, Seth Shellett!' Seth, startled though he was, turned but half-way. So there was yet another on 'em, was there? He suspected some new trick.

'What now then?' he asked, truculently, over his shoulder.

On Harry Noke, who still lay wincing and watching in the grass, the effect of this interruption was dynamic. An old and disregarded memory began stammering in his mind, and a forgotten woman sprang into life. Seth Shellett, the lad had said. For an instant he became deaf and blind to his surroundings, and thoughts crowded intimately upon him. Tisha Bailey's son, Seth Shellett. He struggled into a sitting posture, and called upon his daughter in a new voice.

'Lookee here, Seth Shellett,' repeated the youngest son, disregarding his father's outcry. 'I baint frouden of you. And I daun't mean ee no harm.' If you 'tend right by Cis, we can call cousins together, me and you. But I baint frouden of you, so you maun't think ut.'

Seth, in a quick glance (for he dared not trust a fellow that dared not trust him), saw, standing five yards behind him, the youth from whom these bold ingenuous words proceeded. Slim and slight, a mere boy, he stood bravely, with his shovel held firmly in both hands ready for battle. His features were indistinguishable in the dim light, but his general aspect, no less than his speech, was heartening.

‘Good boy!’ said Seth. ‘That be talken sense, I’ll ’low.’ He lowered his own weapon and moved sideways towards this unexpected ally. When he came near the boy, and could see his young stern face, he felt a quick friendliness stir in him and was moved to speak his heart. ‘I ’tend right by her, boy. Gogzoons I do. I be gwain marry her, tellee. We’ll have a laamentable pretty cottage to live in, and all manner.’

‘Then you’d best take she away drackly-minute,’ answered the youngest son, friend to friend. ‘Father’ll kill un if he gets un home.’

‘Ay,’ said Seth, in low urgent tones. ‘And you too, haply. Come away along o’ me and I’ll hide the both of ye.’

The boy’s eyes lit with pleasure, but there was no more chance of talk; for now Noke called again upon his daughter, and with such urgency, in a tone that seemed so innocent of menace, that Charity at last came out of hiding. During the past few minutes she had suffered a hundred pains of fear, indecision, and divided loyalty. She had seen her father and two brothers struck down, and, though at first she had welcomed it, the sight terrified her. She was distraught, and drawn by a revulsion of feeling, a flood of childish associations, towards her own men: especially towards the man who had fathered and sheltered her. Yet even now she exulted in the possession of Seth, and could not bear to think him lost to her. In the violence of this conflict within her, this bewildering riot of

irreconcilables, she all but lost sense of the secret she dreaded to hear told. She came slowly back, with sulky drooping head, to where her father awaited her. And at sight of her, the young brother sprang forward and placed himself protectively at her side.

‘Ah!’ said Harry Noke. With difficulty and pain he at last struggled to his feet. But his ankle failed him and he staggered, and the boy jumped forward to his support. ‘That’s right, sonny. Gimme y’r shoulder. Now, Charity Noke. What be atwixt you and Seth Shellett then? Tell me that.’ The girl did not answer. ‘Hi, Shellett, come you here. We maun get this straight.’

They stood in a group together: the lovers and their father.

‘What be atwixt you and y’r sister then, hey?’

Seth scowled uncomprehendingly. ‘Sister! I daun’t rightly unnerstand you, Mus Noke.’

‘Oh, dauntie?’ said Noke. ‘Well, hearkee here. What be atwixt you and my darter Charity?’

‘Us wanta get married, Mus Noke. That be all.’

Noke eyed him with shrewd hatred. ‘Have ye got her with child then?’

Seth glanced at the woman; then at his questioner; then at the ground. ‘I dun naw,’ said he. ‘But we’ll wed, whether or no.’

The question was answered. In Noke the storm gathered, shook him body and mind, and found vent at last in a peal of angry laughter. Grinning and roaring, he stared at his new-found son, with love and hate, pride and shame, blazing out of his eyes.

Oaths came tumbling with his laughter, and hate rose ascendant. 'This fellow and his daughter! Murderous jealousy woke again from its uneasy slumber, and now there was new venom in its sting. But with a mighty effort, perhaps the mightiest he had ever made, he controlled his fury that he might say, quietly, and so with the more deadly effect :

'You be Tisha Bailey's son, I'll 'low?'

'Ay. Tisha Shellett's son.'

'She were Tisha Bailey right enough when I got ye. How do, son?'

Seth stared at him in discomfort, thinking him crazy.

'D'ye hear me?' cried Noke. 'Twas I that fathered ye, I'm saying. And this sly slut's y'r sister. Likes to keep her courten in the family, I rackon.'

Seth found his tongue. 'That be a countable stupid tale, Mus Noke.'

'Ha! You daun't believe me, hey? Then ask this pretty punk o' yourn. She'll tell ee.'

'Tis true enough, Shellett,' said one of the brothers. 'Them's bin maken a gurt fool of ye if ye dun naw that.'

Seth had heard often enough—too often—the tale that Tom Shellett had been at pains to set going: how he, Seth, came near to being born out of wedlock, owing to Tom's exceptional talent for seduction. And now this boast recurred to his mind, glittering with falsehood. But it was in Charity's face that he read his doom: Charity's face that burned with

shame, but shewed no trace of disbelief or astonishment.

‘ So tis true, is ut ? ’ he said, with his eyes searching her. ‘ And I maun’t have ye, eh ? ’

Whether true or not, she believed it, and had believed it from the first. This he now knew. The corruption of that knowledge came crawling into his stomach. She had tricked and betrayed him and taken the heart out of his body. Henceforward his fellows would look askance at him, and there would be a black curse on his soul, and evil luck would follow him to the world’s end. And he could never have her. He saw her now as a false picture of delight, a painted emptiness, lovely and loathsome. But saw her so only with the eye of his dark and stricken mind ; for when he looked at her in the flesh, even in this dim evening light, he saw her as he had seen her a score of times before. She was Charity Noke, a hearty handsome wench, whom he had desired for his own, and still desired. And with the knowledge of his continuing desire a great fury entered and possessed him, and jealousy, most avid of Koor’s gods, demanded its ultimate tribute.

‘ So I maun’t have ye, eh ? ’ he repeated thickly. ‘ Nor maun’t no other man, I’ll ’low.’

The blade of Ogo’s axe entered her temple, and a murderer ran raging through the wood.

CHAPTER 9

IN WHICH MR BAILEY RECEIVES A TOKEN AND COACHY
TIMMS HAS THE LAST WORD

THAT night is far away and long ago, and the hearts that suffered it are dust. Time, that gave it birth, has now entombed it ; oblivion has sealed it up ; and a thousand rains have fallen in Glatting Wood. In Marden Fee it was already a legend, one part history to five parts conjecture, on that October evening, two years later, when Mr Bailey and a few of his oldest friends sat watching and waiting for the hour when his seventy-fifth birthday should begin. There were present Mykelborne the wheelwright, Growcock the smith, Sweet the cobbler, Shellett the cowherd, and Coachy Timms the oracle : to say nothing of certain supernumeraries, who, though they could not be excluded from the tavern, had not been admitted to the secret. The five initiates sat side by side, with one eye on the clock. Conversation was moribund ; and Mr Bailey, after numerous failures, had at last abandoned his attempts to revive it. It still wanted twelve minutes to eight, and the tension of waiting had begun to tell on everyone, and especially on Mykelborne, who had a particular reason for his agitation. In his corner of the settle, and made conspicuous by his efforts to hide it, was a large roundish object tied up in a red handkerchief.

This thing, by its mere presence, dominated the scene; the glances of the five were constantly straying towards it; and after each of such glances they would look hastily at Mr Bailey with guilt shining in their eyes: which guilt, were they so unlucky as to encounter his inquiring gaze, they were quick to replace with a look of innocent unconcern hardly to be distinguished from inanity. Then, so soon as they had stared him down, they would nudge each other and whisper: 'He ha'n't seen naun, have a?' This question was always referred to Mykelborne, who thereupon, five times out of six, took a sharp look at Mr Bailey, and said: 'Nay, he ha'n't seen the token, I'll 'low.' But the sixth time, his nerves being over-wrought, he replied with indiscreet vigour: 'And if he ha'n't, tis no thanks to you, dannel ye! Why must you goo looken at ut every minute!' 'I seen you a-looken: that be for why.' 'I din look.' 'I seen you look.' 'Daun't quarrel, my coneys,' said Coachy, in high clear tones. 'Daun't quarrel at drinken time. Tis ungodly.' Mr Bailey, who had been aware of the alien object ever since the moment when Mykelborne, with infinite care to be unobserved, had placed it in its corner, was as nervous as the rest; but he made a brave show of ignorance and there was some art in his acting.

'Now, Abel Sweet,' said Coachy Timms. 'Bring out your voice, neighbour, and liven the waiten.'

'Waiten!' cried Mykelborne indignantly. 'Who's a-waiten?'

‘I dursn’t,’ said Sweet. ‘I just dursn’t sing, Mus Timms, seeing what time tis.’

‘Time!’ cried Coachy, smiling his cherub smile, ‘us daun’t take no account of he, bless us. Bring out your voice, my coney, and let’s hear un. Twill haply ease the minutes by.’

Sweet looked at Mykelborne; both looked at the clock again. Finally Mykelborne nodded judicially. ‘Make ut shart then,’ he stipulated.

With this encouragement, Sweet rose to his feet and began :

*Once I had a cock-a,
And a nottable cock was he !
I took and fed un under the tree,
And my old cock pleased me.
My old cock went scratch-a
My old cock went cock-a-doodle-doo :
Good luck to every poor man’s cock
That crow like my cock do !*

*Once I had a duck-a,
And a nottable duck was she :
I took and fed un under the tree,
And my old duck pleased me.
My old duck went quack-a,
My old cock went cock-a-doodle-doo :
Good luck to every poor man’s cock
That crow like my cock do.*

*Once I had a goose-a
And a nottable goose was she :
I took and fed un under the tree,
And my——*

Mykelborne lifted an imperious hand.

‘Mus Bailey,’ said Mykelborne, ‘twas at eight o’clock your mother brung ee forth, I’ll ’low?’

‘Eh?’ said Mr Bailey, over-acting his surprise a little. ‘Well, yes, I fancy you’re right.’

‘You fancy!’ said Mykelborne. ‘He fancies,’ he remarked to his neighbours with bitter sarcasm. ‘Now listee, Rasmus.’ He became a little stern. ‘You telled me, plain as plain, a week agoo today, that you was born at eight o’clock. Eight striken, says you. You was standen same as it might be there, and I was sitten as near as makes no matter where I be sitten now. At eight striken, Dick, you says, my mother brung me forth.’

‘You’re in the right of it, Dick,’ said Mr Bailey hastily. ‘Twas eight o’clock sartain sure. I remember well enough now.’

‘Ah,’ said Coachy, ‘then you’ve an owdacious good memory, Mus Bailey, young though you be.’

‘Eight o’clock striken,’ said Mykelborne with unction, ‘this day seventy-five year agoo.’

‘This very day? So tis,’ agreed Mr Bailey. ‘Bless me, how time flies, to be sure!’

‘Mus Bailey,’ said Mykelborne, half-rising, ‘we’re all rough men here.’ But he broke off to explain in a confidential aside: ‘This bain’t the speech yet,

Rasmus. Daun't think ut. What I be sayen, and tis not in the speechifying way, is we're all rough men here. But if so be your lady mistus would do us so proud as to come among us for five martal minutes, we'd take ut countable kind in she. Remember the weaker vessel to keep ut holy, as Postle Paul says. And he knawed, did old Postle.'

'Certainly, Dick, certainly!' Mr Bailey vanished into his private parlour, and so quickly returned with Mrs Bailey on his arm that it was clear she had needed no persuasion. She smiled radiantly on the company, and bowed in response to the gratified murmurs that welcomed her.

Mykelborne had by now possessed himself of the token, which he did his best to conceal behind his back, keeping his other hand free for such oratorical gestures as might be needed. 'Mus Bailey and Mistus Bailey . . . What be the time, Abel Sweet?' With this question he affirmed the importance and dignity of the occasion. Henceforward, due order must be observed, and every man perform his proper duty and no other: the spokesman was dedicated to speech, the timekeeper to observation of the clock.

'He do want a minute yet,' said Sweet.

That minute was the longest of the day. Bright beads appeared on the brow of the frustrated orator. Mr Bailey gazed unhappily at the floor, and Mrs Bailey's smile grew wan. But at last, with dramatic emphasis, the hour of release struck. Eight o'clock.

Sweet counted each stroke. One . . . two . . . three . . .

'Tis eight o'clock now, Mus Mykelborne,' said Sweet.

'He do know that, you gurt gummut!' said Growcock. 'He've a pair of ears, anta?'

'Hush, my coneys,' said Coachy Timms. 'Take a deep drink, for there be the speech to come now, and no chance for swalleren.'

'Mus Bailey and Mistus Bailey,' said Mykelborne, 'we be all rough folkses here and ignorant sinners, and you an owdacious eddicated man. But seeing you was born seventy-five year ago at eight o'clock striken, as it might be this very minute——'

'Nay, tis past the hour now, Mus Mykelborne,' Sweet corrected him.

'—as it might be this very minute, Abel Sweet. *Might* be, I said, dint I! And so, Mus Bailey, seeing you be seventy-five year old, we thine unworthy servants do bring thee humble and hearty thanks. Likewise a token. We've summered and wintered ye a dunnamany years now, and you've always and all days bin a true breencheese friend to us.'

'So he has!' said Growcock.

'As sure as I sit here,' corroborated Sweet.

'Ay,' said Coachy, nodding sagaciously, 'he be a likely youngster, sure enough.'

'And so, Mus Bailey, what with one thing and what with another thing, us have seen fit and praaper to purchase and procure a token for ee: which same token,' said Mykelborne, suddenly, with a proud delighted smile, bringing forth his treasure, which he held dangling by the knot of the red handkerchief

that covered it, 'which same token us do now present. Do now present . . . And a countable genteel token tis, Mus Bailey, being one of they teapots same as the gentry has, to wish ee long life and happiness, because all flesh be grass, says Postle, and whatsumdever a man do sow, that same shall spring up in the day of moën and rippen . . . Here be thy token, Rasmus. Take ut and God bless.'

Mykelborne sat down, mopping his brow. He looked at Coachy, who nodded grave approval. 'Now ut be *his* canter,' said Coachy, indicating Mr Bailey with a nod. 'God send he be brief about it. Twould be carnal folly to talk all night of teapots.' He took a deep and pious drink of his beer.

'My dear friends——' began Mr Bailey.

'Hushee!' cried Sweet. 'Hushee, Mus Bailey. Here be Master Hugh come amongst us.'

Hugh Marden stood hesitating in the doorway. Now he came forward. 'Good evening, Bailey. Good evening, Mrs Bailey. My father asked me to bring you his good wishes, Bailey. You're having a birthday, I hear.'

The Squire had sent his own son! It reminded Mr Bailey of something in the Bible: he did not remember quite what. 'Tis a wonderful kindness in him, sir, and in yourself too, I'll 'low. A wonderful condescension, I'm sure——'

The young man waved his protestations aside. 'Oh, ah, and there's this book for you, in token——'

'Another token for ee, Mus Bailey!' cried Sweet. 'Tis a proud day we be maken of ut.'

With trembling hands Mr Bailey received his book: a small octavo volume, bound in marbled boards and half-leather. At its title-page he dared not look, for during the past few weeks he had heard rumours almost too beautiful for belief, and he lacked courage as yet to put his rapturous conjecture to the proof. But the words of the young gentleman fell like music on his dazed ears. 'My father and some other gentlemen thought to gratify you by having it printed. A small edition: two hundred copies, I believe.' So the title-page was no longer to be feared, and could no longer be resisted. Mr Bailey took one furtive peep and saw himself in all the glory that Caslon can invest a man with. *The Poetical Works of Mr Erasmus Bailey*. (That 'Mr' had been Brother Raphe's thought, and it made all the difference.) He looked no further; one glimpse had translated him. The burden of his joy being too great for one alone to bear, his hand went seeking that of Lizzie, who stood comfortably near. Husband and wife exchanged a glance of pure happiness.

And now he must stammer his thanks to the young gentleman.

'Sir——'

But the young gentleman was already gone.

'He be pleased with Squire's token, I'll 'low,' said Mykelborne.

'I think a be so,' agreed Sweet.

Mr Bailey, roused from ecstasy, remembered his guests and was suddenly ashamed for his neglect

of them. 'Neighbours,' said he, 'tis true that I be pleased with Squire's token. But nothing today could have pleased me more than this elegant teapot you've given me. A teapot such as this teapot is a thing I've always hankered after——'

'Ah,' said Mykelborne. 'D'ye mark that, Abel Sweet? Cobbler Sweet,' he explained, 'was for given ye a pair of bellowses, poor fellow.'

'Nothing could have pleased me more,' repeated Mr Bailey, 'and nothing could have pleased me so much, unless twas the fine speech you made me, Dick.'

'Ay, twas a middlin good speech, I'll 'low,' said Mykelborne. 'Say, neighbours, what a mercy young Master Marden dint come five minutes sooner! Twould a been the moiderment and doom of my speech.'

'So twould,' agreed Mr Bailey.

But his thoughts were far away: he hardly knew what he said. He looked down the long vista of his past and wondered what his youthful fevers had portended, and by what miracle it chanced that he had lived to enjoy so rich and lingering an autumn. It was a moment of deep and tranquil beauty, and involuntarily he began seeking a phrase in which to enshrine it. Thereupon his soaring thoughts wheeled back into the small circle of here and now, and with a sudden renewal of excitement he remembered the volume his hand still clasped. His wife, watching him, knew that his fingers itched to be turning those enchanted pages. She interposed.

‘Fill up, neighbours,’ said she, ‘and make yourselves homely. And you, Rasmus—come you into my parlour for two-three minutes. They’ll give you leave, and take no hurt, seeing tis your birthday. I’ve something to shew ee, my dear.’

As the door closed upon them, Growcock rose to his feet, drank a pint in one draught, and gave a deep sigh of contentment. ‘Well, neighbours. Now speechifying be over, us can come back to comfortable talk.’ He turned to Tom Shellett. ‘I’ll ’low you never had word from that Seth of yourn after he done murder in Glatten Wood, Tahm?’

‘I never did,’ said Tom. ‘And he worn’t no son of mine nuther. That I’ll tellee.’

‘Did he do ut, d’ye think?’ asked Abel Sweet. ‘Some says yes, and some says no. A fine upstanden wench her was too. Twas a shameful thing if a did ut.’

‘A runned away, didn’t a?’ asked Growcock, challengingly.

‘A runned away sure enough,’ conceded Sweet.

‘Very well then. A did ut.’

‘No son of mine, tellee,’ cried Tom Shellett complainingly. ‘A countable fierce rogue was that one. I woon’t like to be in his shoes on Doomsday.’

‘And if you was,’ said Coachy Timms, ‘you’d be lost in ’em, Tahm, a liddle dry fellow like you. And Goddle Mighty ud never see shim of ye, I’ll ’low.’

‘Twill be a powerful great day, all said,’ re-

marked Mykelborne pensively, 'when the trumpet do sound and blow us into the hand of the liven Gard, as the Book says.'

'And a tolerable handful he'll find us,' said Coachy. 'Kings and poor folk and sech, all cantering abroad in's palm, as it might be in Nightingale Roughs.'

'Doomsday——' began Mykelborne.

'I'll tellee,' said Coachy, warming to his theme, 'I'll tellee how tis, neighbours . . .'

We leave them talking.

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